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Idea in Stone

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Hamish MacDonald

“No, no — 'tis no laughing matter; little by little, whatever your wishes may be, you will destroy and undermine, until nothing of what makes Scotland Scotland shall remain.”

*- John Gibson Lockhard,
Memoirs of Sir Walter Scott*

Chapter One

Cargo Cult

“Next.”

Stefan approached the counter and placed his book face-down, sliding it toward the checkout clerk like a ransom note. The young clerk in a Book Block apron waved a beige gun over the book’s barcode. The till emitted a bleep and showed the price in blue. “How will you be paying for this?”

Stefan handed his debit card to the clerk, his thumb over his name until he had to let go. The clerk swiped the card and handed it back. With a sigh, Stefan reached for it.

“Hey,” said the clerk, taking a second look at the card, “you’ve got the same last name as that cow who’s always on TV. God, I hate her. The CBC rolls her ass out on stage every chance they get. Did you see that show on Sunday night? What was it? ‘Down on the Reservation with Delonia Mackechnie for Remembrance Day’? I’ve heard she’s not really even Indian. She’s like this weird ugly dyke giraffe. I can’t wait till she’s dead so I can stop seeing those stupid shows.”

Stefan took back his card. The clerk picked up the book to put it in a Book Block bag. He glanced at the title: *Selfness: A Workbook for Adult Children of Famous People*.

“Oh,” said the clerk, “sorry.”

Stefan left the shop, pausing briefly at the door to stuff the book into a waste-bin.

~

Stefan shut the door behind him and put his house-key into the pocket of his heavy jacket. He raised his nose to the air: *She’s home*. The scent of ylang-ylang gave away Delonia’s presence. Perhaps, he thought, he could make it to his room.

Halfway through the dining room he paused. His mother was no surprise, standing in one of her trademark outfits, which were custom-made to suit not just her predilection for wild colours but her unusual height, too. The dress matched the bright blues and yellows of the tropical fish in the aquarium behind her. But someone else was with her, a young man with one arm sunk up to the shoulder in the tank. Delonia heard Stefan and turned around.

“Stefan! I’m glad you’re home,” she said with a big smile. Her top teeth protruded like the cow-catcher of an old train. His mother had a weight of presence, a charisma, but she was not pretty, and it hurt him every time he noticed. As a public figure, she was often projected and stretched and illuminated, adding to the effect. Other people liked her well enough, at least those who admitted to buying her records and watching her specials, so why should her looks matter? This particular smile, though, he knew this one, the up-to-no-good smile.

“Stefan, this is Tyler,” she said, gesturing to the young man, who turned and extended his hand to shake Stefan’s, then laughed and took it back when he noticed it was wet with dirty fish tank water. His smile flattened Stefan: wide, with teeth so white they verged on blue. His hair and eyes were dark, his wet arm thicker and more developed than Stefan could ever hope his might be, as if this mesomorph were a whole other species.

“I met Tyler when he was cleaning the Jacksons’ aquarium down the street, and you know what a state ours is in.” She turned to Tyler. “Stefan won’t even touch it when it gets like this. Oh, look, your shirt’s all wet with that filthy water. Stefan, take him downstairs, give him one of your shirts, and put his in the dryer.”

“Mom!”

“What? You’re both boys. You look like you’re about the same age, too. Stefan is thirty-tw—”

“Excuse us, Tyler,” said Stefan, pulling his mother by the arm toward the kitchen. He closed the door behind him and spoke in a strained whisper: “Mom, stop it. I know what you’re trying to do, and I want you to stop it.”

"But Stefan, did you get a look at him? He stepped off the pages of one of those magazines."

"Yeah, but I don't buy *those* magazines, do I? Besides, people like him aren't interested in people like me."

"How do you know that?"

"Look, Mom, people just don't like me that way."

She put a hand softly against his face. "Stefan, I just want you to be happy." She moved her hand to his stomach as if examining for something. "You've got so much vexation inside you. If you met someone nice then maybe all that would settle down. I didn't mean to upset you."

He smiled at her. "It's okay, I don't mind. He probably doesn't like men anyway."

"Oh, no, he does. Sue Jackson asked him."

"Ugh. That doesn't help. Okay, I'm going to get him a shirt," said Stefan, heading for the basement.

A minute later, Stefan heard unfamiliar steps on the stairs, and the aquarium cleaner poked his head through the door, his arms on the doorframe. "Hi," he said, "it's okay, I don't need a shirt. I'm going straight home after this, so I can change there."

Stefan nodded, then laughed nervously. "I'm sorry about that," he said. "Every once in a while Mom does this romantic hunter-gatherer thing. Sorry if it made you uncomfortable." Despite himself, he noticed he was trying to do his favourite attractive-guy look from the mirror.

"It's okay," said Tyler, "you'd be surprised how often it comes up with this job. You know that Mrs. Jackson? Well, all I'll say is that she's got big tits." They laughed, then Tyler tapped the doorframe, smiled, and left.

Stefan sat down on his bed and sighed. This was familiar, this thing he called "the pain of never". *Why*, he wondered, *does beauty hurt to look at*? The feeling wasn't loneliness; more like a cousin to it. But sometimes loneliness came along for the ride, and together they ran him down.

He stared at the ceiling, hearing his mother walk Tyler to the door, then creak about, on to some other task. He had things under control and was happy being single — why did she have to stir it all up again? He closed his eyes and imagined the house upside-down, with him pinned to the ceiling in his bed, and her walking upside down on the other side of his floor. With one mental shake she fell loose. He kept shaking the house until she dropped out the chimney.

~

Stefan woke up an hour later, stuck in the stupefaction of a mid-afternoon nap. He gradually recalled who and where he was, but lay in bed a while longer to avoid the responsibility of deciding what to do with the rest of his day. He remembered a new CD that was supposed to be released that week and made it his mission to find it. He looked to his right, where thousands of plastic jewel-case spines covered the entire wall. He'd have to shuffle them all around to make space for this addition.

He bounced himself out of bed, grabbed a CD, and bounded up the stairs. He passed the living room, where Delonia sat at the piano with her bifocals, a pen, and sheets of music paper. "Where are you going?" she called as he flashed past the room's archway.

"Out," he replied, poking his head back around the corner. "I remembered something I need."

"Need or want?" she chided. Stefan rolled his eyes. "Alright, but Cerise is going to be by this afternoon to move her things in, and I think it would be nice if you were here."

"Okay, I'll try to make it back," he said, heading out the door. As he walked, his mind filled in variations on the rest of what he wanted to say. *Because I wouldn't want to miss seeing my mother's girlfriend move into my parents' house. Because I'd hate for something heavy to drop*

on one of her cats. Because if I'm lucky you'll crack some innuendo-laced joke to her that'll make me picture you two naked together.

Leaves clung to the trees overhead, strangely green for a November day. Stefan pulled the headphones from his jacket pocket and listened to the CD he brought, the previous album by Microchimps. He loved them, though there was something unfulfilling about listening to it when he knew there was a newer album out there. His lips moved slightly with the music, and he unconsciously adjusted the inner workings of his throat to mimic the singer's style. He looked around, saw that there was no one within earshot of him, and sang quietly to himself.

He stopped singing by the time he reached Yonge Street, which was busy with Saturday shoppers. The store-front windows promised coolness and bargains. Billboards towered above on every free surface, featuring tanned, thin, scantily-clad people. There was something sexy in the atmosphere up there that was missing at the street level, where sweaters, coats, dark colours, and plain faces prevailed.

Stefan had a pattern for browsing the music stores based on selection, price, and what the staff were like to look at. He had favourite staff members who were friendly, cute, or both, though downtown interactions were limited in nature by a band of high-pressure air surrounding each person, preserving anonymity and professionalism, and also preventing any real contact.

Stefan decided to head straight for his favourite store. It didn't look as nice as the others, with its scruffy off-white interior, a necessary paint job infinitely delayed by the rock star signatures scribbled on its walls. With poker shark fingers Stefan flipped through the M category of the Indie/Alternative section. The most recent Microchimp album was the one he had in his CD player. The new album wasn't in the stacks or in the displays above. He could ask the staff, but he knew they'd say that if it wasn't in the stacks, it wasn't in. And if this store didn't have it, no one in town would.

His mission was thwarted. He briefly considered buying another album, but knew that was silly: he'd hate it when he got it home because it wasn't That One. When he was struck with thing-lust, it was specific and could not be fooled. He'd assumed that this search would not only work, it would fill his whole afternoon, too. Now his day was without purpose. But he couldn't go home. Not yet. Not knowing what he'd face there.

He walked up the shop's stairs to the Folk/Adult Contemporary section. He knew better, but found his fingers moving through the M section there until they reached 'Mackechnie'. With each subsequent flip he moved back in time. Last year's album showed his mother just as she looked today at home. Moving to the previous, from a few years before, he saw his mother with grey hair — a period when she briefly stopped dyeing her hair black. *Flip, flip* — the late Eighties, with pastel skirt-suits and a cloud of bullet-proof hair.

Flip, flip.

His father was alive again.

Robert Mackechnie held the neck of an upright guitar with one hand while the other rested around his wife's shoulder, and a big, contented smile parted his soft reddish-brown beard lengthwise. The couple's complementary leisure suits carbon-dated the album to somewhere in the late Seventies. *Where was I that day?* Stefan wondered.

"Urph!" he heard someone moan. He turned around to see a staff member struggling with a large cardboard cut-out on the stairs. The figure wasn't going to fit in this small space, but the staff member was either determined or under orders to make it fit. As the employee bumped it around the railing, Stefan saw the printed side: *Delonia Mackechnie: Verses Versus Verses*. The employee forced the figure upright, and the head bent forward at a right angle to the body. "Damn." He tried to fold her hair, which didn't work, so he devised a way to accordion-fold her neck so her face rested in her cleavage.

Noticing Stefan, the staff member apologised as if practising for his manager: "She doesn't fit in here. She's just too big."

"I know how you feel," said Stefan.

~

Stefan moved from store to store, but nothing appealed to him. He searched for something — a book, a new product of some sort — that would give him some newfound ability or sense of direction. The searching looks he gave the fresh-faced clerks in the store came from the same instinct. There was a luminous promise in everything, but he knew the promise was an empty one. *Here's everything I could hope to have*, he thought, looking at a toaster with shapely Deco lines, *but it's all meaningless. What about romance?* he wondered. *No. Romance is not salvation.* For all he knew, love wasn't real but just another thing people distracted themselves with. It was all just marketing and acquisition in the vain hope of filling the void.

He shook his head. *I live in a cargo cult.*

~

Stefan stood outside the church. *This is crazy*, he thought. He'd read about these people in one of his mother's "hocus-pocus" magazines, as he called them. This group claimed that they'd managed to synthesise science and religion into a new practice which gave them power over the mysteries of life and death. They called themselves the Matholics, and Stefan couldn't believe he was actually walking into one of their hives.

This was one of Toronto's older churches, having been built in the early 1900's. Stefan looked around and laughed to himself: if his mother saw him doing something spiritual, she'd be almost as ecstatic as she was when she discovered he liked men. "At last, I knew you'd have something interesting about you!" There was no way he'd give her the satisfaction of knowing about this.

"Can I help you?"

Stefan turned to see a man in clerical robes of shiny black material with a high, straight collar. The man smiled, warm and friendly, without the spinning hypnotic whirls in his eyes Stefan half-expected to see.

"Uh," said Stefan, embarrassed to say it, even though these people claimed this was their stock and trade, "I'd like to get in touch with my father."

"I'm going to make two assumptions," said the clergyman. "You've never been here before, and your father is dead."

"Two for two," said Stefan, relaxing a little.

"Not a problem," said the man. "I'm Brother James. Welcome to the Toronto chapter of the Matholic church. Let me show you around." He showed Stefan the old features of the church and the parts that they'd renovated. Finally, he led Stefan to a bank of confessionals. "You don't need to believe in our doctrine or anything in particular for this to work. It's been proven time and again. But you'll see for yourself. Here," he said, indicating the curtained entrance of a confessional.

Stefan sat in the dim light. The cleric slid open the small window, but Stefan couldn't see him through the mesh. "The trick with the Eter-net is that the dead use a different logic from us sometimes, and the way they communicate, well, it's subtle. It's easy to miss, which is why there are so many doubters. But it is very powerful. So you should be absolutely sure you want to do this before we begin."

Stefan paused. He wasn't sure if he believed in any of this, so it seemed pretty harmless. And if it *did* work at all...

"No, I want to do this," he said.

"Alright," said the cleric's soft voice, "let's begin. You'll see a piece of paper in front of you, and a pen just to the right of it." An angled light-box, like a photographer's, illuminated in front of him. On it was a single sheet of paper with a pearlescent tone and tiny, hair-like filaments running through it. Stefan looked to the side and found a squat blue fountain pen. He uncapped it with an audible click. "Good," said the cleric, "now write to the

person you want to reach. If you make any requests, try to use simple sentences, as much for yourself as for the recipient.”

“Uh, alright,” said Stefan. The very idea was preposterous, yet he put his pen to the sheet and wrote the words “Dear Dad”. He paused there, a stream of memories flying through his mind — his parents playing on a campground stage while he toddled through the crowd; his father and a slightly taller him in a picture, behind them a black Lake Superior and a blazing pink and red sunset sky; his father giving him his first drink — a hot rum toddy at a ski lodge where they performed some Christmases; his father pulling the car over because he and Stefan were crying with laughter at something on the radio; his father, his father, his father.

For the next half hour he wrote, his handwriting getting smaller and smaller as he went so he could say as much as possible in the space of the page. He wrote all the things he’d never spoken before, and described as best he could everything that had happened since he was nine and his father made that fateful step off the stage, falling into the percussion section of the orchestra pit, impaled on a high-hat. People said his father was a drunk, but he refused to believe it. With barely enough room for another line, he realised he hadn’t actually asked his father for anything. Maybe there was no need. But that was the point of this exercise, so he wrote two words in the tiny space left in the corner of the page: “Save me.”

He’d completely forgotten about the cleric. “Hello?”

“Hello,” said a contented voice from the other side of the divider, “are you finished?”

“Yeah.”

The curtain whipped open with a clatter and Stefan squinted at the daylight. The cleric stood there, smiling, while Stefan clutched his piece of paper. “Come with me,” he said. He led Stefan to a vestibule near the front of the church and gestured to something like a cross between a Roman pedestal and a photocopier. Its top was open, and the man gestured for Stefan to put his paper down on it. The cleric was about to close the top, but stopped. “Oh,” he said, “there’s just the matter of payment.”

“Right,” said Stefan, “how much is it?”

“One hundred and fifty dollars. That includes tax.”

Stefan blanched, but he had to go through with this, and not just to save face. “Do you take credit cards?”

“We certainly do,” said the cleric, pulling out a device from his robes. Stefan handed his card to the man and he zipped it through. A moment later, he said, “Good, it’s been approved. Thank you.” He closed the top of the pillar, and a strong light leaked from under the lid. Stefan could feel the heat, and heard his paper crackling.

The cleric opened the top and the sheet was gone. “All finished,” he said. Stefan smiled and nodded, feeling quite stupid, having fallen for this magic trick. He quietly followed as the cleric led him back to the front entrance of the church.

~

Stefan turned the corner to his street and walked under the canopy of trees. He saw a rental truck parked and knew it was for his house. Closer now, he watched men in blue jumpsuits moving large objects from the open rear of the truck to his front door — boxes, gnarled antique furniture, and a procession of cello cases. Stefan stepped around the workers and boxes to get through the door.

“Stefan,” he heard Delonia saying from somewhere in the mess. He kept moving, wanting nothing more than to reach his room, the place his friends jokingly referred to as The Fortress of Solitude. However, the notion of Superman living in his mother’s basement had loserish implications he didn’t like to think about.

“Stefan,” repeated Delonia. She’d spotted him and closed in. He tried to dodge around a cello case, but his foot made contact with something disturbingly soft, and the thing made a hiss of feline protest. “There you are,” said Delonia. “I wanted to ask you to stay home

for supper tonight. It's the first night Cerise will be with us, and I thought it would be nice for us all to eat together."

"Mom, can you understand how galactically weird this is for me? You're asking me to have supper with my mother and her goddamned—"

"Hello Stefan," said Cerise, suddenly at his side.

"Hello," he replied. "How are you?"

"Frankly, I'm a bit nervous about the move. I was in my other house for a long time, and I'm not sure how the cats will adjust. And I don't want to come between you and your mother."

Feel free, he thought. "Well, thanks for being so honest."

The phone rang, mercifully ending the conversation. It stood on a table next to Stefan, but he made no move to answer it. Stefan watched as Delonia rushed awkwardly through the slalom course of detritus, then he picked up the phone and handed it to her. Offended on his mother's behalf, Cerise asked in a tone far too parental for his liking, "Why didn't you answer that for her?"

"I can't use the telephone."

Delonia covered the mouthpiece, aware of the exchange. "He hears things on it, voices," she said, wiggling a hand next to her ear.

Cerise looked at Stefan blankly.

"She exaggerates," he said. "It's just one voice."

"Oh." Not sure what to do with the information, Cerise picked up a cat.

~

Stefan took off the respectable-looking sweater he'd worn to the supper table, folded it up, and stuffed it in a drawer. He put on his cordless headphones and put a CD in the flat stereo on the wall. The upbeat music made him feel happy, and he danced around as he pulled off his trousers. He stood in front of the mirror in his T-shirt and Y-fronts. *You are kinda short*, he thought, *and pretty skinny, except for that*. He lifted his shirt and poked his small tummy. *And you might lose your hair*. He lifted his drooping bangs to inspect the tide-line with its V-shaped peak. *But I think you're cute*. His eyes were big and brown, set into a long face that tapered (maybe a little too much) into a small chin. His long nose led to a wide smile bracketed by long dimples. *I have dimples, not lines*, he thought. The whole effect was endearingly cute, but cartoonishly, friendly-cute. *The aquarium guy was smoulderingly cute. I want to smoulder. People like smoulder. Smoulder, smoulder, smoulder*. The word lost its meaning and sounded funny, foreign.

He hit the Stop button on the stereo, hung up his headphones, and dropped into bed, the rhythm of the song still in his head, carrying him away.

He drifted backwards, flashes of the day's sights before him, giving way gradually to a soft darkness. A familiar voice spoke words he couldn't quite hear, then faded out, replaced by the sound of his father's voice singing a simple tune. Then that, too, became just a faint echo in a large space.

He opened his dream eyes and found himself sitting cross-legged on the moon. The powdery landscape stretched away in every direction, punctuated with the odd rock or crater. Fireworks went off overhead in the dark space-sky. Stefan reached for the can of beer which, of course, by dream logic was at his side. He took a sip, then placed it back down, noticing as he did that the ground wasn't dusty anymore, but covered in prickly, purple, almost floral undergrowth. Looking up again, he saw the whole moon covered in purple.

~

Stefan's stereo turned itself on, blaring music. He sat upright in bed, but couldn't see. Blearily panicked, he groped at his face, discovering that his T-shirt was up over his head. He pulled it off and looked at the clock beside his bed: seven-thirty. *Time to get up for work*. He looked

down and scratched his stomach. There was something in his belly-button. *Lint?* He plucked it out and looked at it. It was a tiny piece of newsprint with the letter E on it. He shook his head and put it on his bedside table, then went upstairs to have a shower.

Chapter Two

Jacks and Queens

Stefan waited for the subway, leaning against the glazed, curry-coloured tiles of the platform wall. He let the other passengers crowd along the ledge: he wasn't in a hurry to get to work, he didn't like being jostled in a crowd, he was afraid of "pushers", and he wanted to feel cooler than everybody else. And cool, he knew, was all in the little details.

For one, his job allowed him to dress however he wanted. Today he wore a T-shirt and a pair of baggy hemp trousers his mother bought him as a birthday present a few months ago. To his surprise, they became his favourite trousers, and they also seemed indestructible. He allowed that some of her wingnut ideas had merit. *Some.*

A subway train, silver and burnished like something from the back of the cutlery drawer, pulled up and its doors opened. The crowd flowed toward them like water to a drain. A voice came over the station's public address system telling the riders to let the other passengers off first, but it went unheeded. As the voice spoke, Stefan heard something else, as if a second person was speaking close to the announcer. But Stefan knew otherwise. The faint, broken words were a mix of English and perhaps a foreign language, but the voice was as familiar as his own. He'd learned to dismiss it years ago.

He pictured a film clip he'd seen of a Japanese subway in which men used large aluminium potato-mashers to shove people into the cars. He smiled.

The pixel-board on the platform showed that it was now after 9am. Predictably, the crowd thinned, and Stefan moved away from the wall. Minutes later, the next train arrived, comfortably empty, and Stefan strolled leisurely through the doors as they opened. The subway game was all about getting a seat, and he'd just scored a goal.

~

Stefan waited in a small room that was beige in every way except for the posters on its walls, relics of past children's shows. Cartoon characters and live entertainers looked down at him, smiling so big and happy they looked about to drool. He moved the overflowing ashtray on the coffee-table aside, put his legs up, and leaned back. His fingers probed and massaged under his jaw, loosening the root of his tongue from below. He hummed with his mouth closed and stretched the soft palate at the back of his throat.

A woman opened the door, smiled, and said, "We're ready for you Mr. Mackechnie." He nodded, picked up his jacket and satchel, and followed her. They walked through a maze of halls decorated with similar posters and children's broadcasting awards.

The production assistant remained strangely silent as they walked. "You're new here," said Stefan. "What's your name?"

"I, uh, my name's Wendy."

"Hi," said Stefan, "nice to meet you. So did you study broadcasting, or is this just a job?"

"I'm, uh, I'm sorry, I was told not to speak to you before you go into the studio. The producer got really mad at me the other day after I talked to one of the talent. He fell out of character and had to warm up again."

"Who did you talk to?"

"Ron Emery."

"Figures. He does the voice-over for a goddamned *lightbulb*. There *is* no character. Certainly not the way he does it. Yeah, don't worry about all that crap with me."

Wendy laughed, relieved. "What do you do to get into character for Bloob?"

"I do a funny voice."

"Yeah," she said, "but people really respond to him. You must do something. There's a quality to your performance that's really special."

"I don't know. I brush my teeth. Have you ever been in the booth at the same time as Ron? Ugh." He smiled at her. "Okay, seriously, I do some vocal exercises, I suck on a cough drop if I'm sick, and I goof around in front of a microphone. We had a lot of mics around when I was growing up, so I've always been comfortable around them."

Wendy gestured him past a thick door with a number four and an unlit 'Recording' sign over it. "You're in this booth today. Thanks very much for the talk. I appreciate it. Sheesh, and they said you were difficult."

Stefan's smile disappeared as she closed the door. *What?* His concentration left him completely.

The sound engineer held up a magic-marker sign to the window. "Ready?" Stefan held up a 'one minute' finger. *Difficult?* He pulled his sides — the dialogue he was supposed to record — from his satchel, then reached back in and rummaged around for the little figurine of his character. He found it in a corner of the bag, a blue plastic ox with a ring through its nose, standing upright in a pair of running shoes. He pulled it out, blew it clean, and sat it on the music stand in front of him. Looking at it, he cocked his head, made an adjustment in his throat, and said, "Reduce!" He shook his head, poked fingers at his throat, and tried again. "Reduce, reuse—" He smiled, then turned to the sound booth, giving a thumbs-up and nodding.

~

An hour later, the show's producer visited the booth. "How's it going, Stefan?" she asked.

"I don't know, I'm a little off today," he said. "I had this weird conversation with the new PA just bef—"

"Yeah, sorry about that, we've been having some problems with her."

"No, it's not her fault. She just said — nevermind. Look, I have issues with this week's script."

One of the producer's plucked red eyebrows rose. "Really?"

"I know you don't care what I think. I'm just a guy who's paid ever-so-slightly above scale to do a voice-over. But, you know, I am Bloob's voice, so I feel a certain responsibility for what this public figure says to children."

The producer said nothing.

"I know, I know. It's just a stupid kiddie show."

The producer's other eyebrow raised.

"What I mean is, I realise that it's an important commercial property for you and it's become a very popular show. But we are making statements about the environment here, and I think it's important for them to be accurate." He flipped through his script. "Like this part: 'Kids, you are the future of the earth. Only you can save it.'" He looked at the producer. "C'mon."

"Stefan, don't you believe that children are the future?"

"Don't get all Whitney on me. The show's biggest sponsor is Porvental Chemicals. Last year the company paid no Canadian taxes and 'accidentally' spilled enough solvents into Lake Ontario to petrify every last zebra mussel."

"But the mussels were growing out of control. They were a hazard to the lake's natural ecology."

"Yeah, so the company got an environmental grant for \$11.2 million."

"Stefan, did you ever think that the company is trying to turn their industry around by investing in projects like our show?"

"But—"

"Stefan, it's not your concern. Don't make trouble. Just do your day's lines. Leave the issues to us." She started to leave, but paused at the door. "Oh, did you happen to make a statement to Greenpeace?"

"Um, I might have."

"Please don't do things like that," she said, leaving the room.

Stefan went back to the music stand and picked up his figurine. "Hey kids," he said in the character's voice, "do you know that your mommy's makeup contains poisonous chemicals called phthalates?" He turned the figurine's head back and forth. "Hey kids, did you know that my ass is completely for sale?" Stefan tried to make the head nod, but it wouldn't, so he picked up a pencil and poked it into the ox's chest repeatedly. He looked up to see the sound technician laughing and holding up a sign that said "Lunch".

Stefan left the booth, and Wendy ran up beside him. "Jean said that I upset you this morning. I'm really sorry, I don't know how I—"

"It's okay," said Stefan, "it's not your fault. It's between me and her. Well, me, her, a multinational chemical company, and some zebra mussels."

"Oh, good. Here," she said, handing him a slip of paper, "you got a phone message from someone while you were in the booth. It sounded like he said his name was Ellen."

"Do you suppose it might have been 'Allen'?"

"No, I don't think so. Sounded like Ellen."

"Right, okay. Thanks." He left her, banking off down a hallway toward the commissary where he bought his lunch. Although it was November, the weather was still warm, so he ate outside in a concrete park sheltered between skyscrapers, looking at a phone booth all the while. When he finished, he crumpled up the packaging, napkin, and bag from his lunch and threw it into a waste-bin, thinking what an awful amount of garbage it was. *I sound like Mom*. Then he marched to the phone booth.

He dropped a quarter into the phone, dialled the number he'd been given, and braced himself. "Hello, *Lewisbus*, *Traffordwalk*, and *Lemirefish*. How can I help *youbuttie*?" Stefan struggled to filter out the second voice.

"Hi, could I please speak to Allen Hoffstand, please?" asked Stefan, realising that he'd said 'please' twice. He wasn't good at business-speak.

"One moment," said the receptionist.

Allen answered a moment later. Aware of Stefan's trouble with the phone, he communicated the evening's plans slowly. The guys and he were meeting for coffee, maybe dinner, and wanted Stefan along. Stefan said he was up for an evening away from home, as the connubial bliss between his mother and her girlfriend was still at a toxic level.

"I have to go," said Allen. "I'm in discussions *stay* this afternoon about a big *kipestate* in Forest Hill, a bunch of siblings *alldoon* fighting over this property. Should be *funday*."

"I'm off to explain in a funny voice why not having an atmosphere will be a good thing," said Stefan. "I'll see you tonight." They said their goodbyes. Stefan was suitably convinced Allen had no idea he'd be walking into a surprise party this evening. Allen's partner of five years hadn't been invited for a strategic reason: they wanted to have fun.

Back in the booth, Stefan recorded several minutes of Bloob-speak. The sound engineer gave him the thumbs up. Then he made the "Okay, let's move on" signal they'd worked out. Stefan had some bit parts to record, characters whose preliminary sketches he'd seen. His job now was to give sensitive, nuanced line readings for a leaky lawn sprinkler and a toaster with a knife stuck in it that was supposed to look surprised but looked more like it had been murdered.

The technician poked angrily at his sound board and his computer. He shook his head and made a throat-cutting gesture, then held up an open 'Take five' hand. Stefan nodded, picked up his sides from the music stand, and left the booth. He went to the producer's office, knocked on her door, and opened it.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Uh," said Stefan.

"What?"

"I'm supposed to record this toaster dialogue this afternoon. Isn't that a bit outside the show's scope? I mean, I thought we were supposed to be doing environmental topics, not safety tips."

“Stefan,” she said, putting down her pen and turning to face him, “did you know that Ron Emery came in here the other day and did the most perfect impression of Bloob?”

“Oh,” said Stefan. He nodded and left. Rather than head back to the booth, he went to the sound-stage where they taped the live-action *Super Fantastic Window* show (in English and French). He made his way across the stage by the illumination of a bare-bulb work light on an iron stand, past the big gold window frame with its green-screen panes, past the bulbous coat-rack with its fun-fur coats, and dropped with a sigh onto the same puffy green couch that he’d seen on the show as a child. He unbuttoned his hemp trousers and masturbated.

~

Wendy opened the door of the ironically beige Green Room. “Oh there you are,” she said.

“Chuck fixed the mixer,” Stefan stood and followed her again.

“What’s BSE?” she asked as she opened the booth’s door for him.

“Huh? I think it stands for Bovine Spongiform Ecephalo-something. Mad Cow disease. Why?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said. “I just heard Jean talking about it on the phone with one of the writers, and I didn’t know what it meant.” She shut the door as she left.

Stefan stared at his little figurine.

~

“Hey guys,” said Stefan, coming up the stairs to the coffee-shop’s second floor. He placed his foamed soy milk spiced tea drink on the table, took off his coat, and plopped down into one of the deep chairs.

“Hey Stef,” said Allen. Stefan noted that Allen, as could be expected, had already been home, changed out of his business suit, redone his hair (and a put on a touch of make-up? or was that fake tan?), and changed into queer gear, since he was going to be seen in the gay ghetto. He was in a relationship, but he still wanted to be wanted. Tonight he wore tight black jeans and a white T-shirt that clung to his gym-enhanced frame. The T-shirt was printed with black letters: “Read my lisp: Equality now!”

To Stefan’s left was Paulo, with arresting dark eyes, wavy black hair, and skin that was dark enough to look like a golden tan, not quite dark enough to be considered ‘ethnic’ — except by casting directors. His acting talent was considerable, but success in film or television eluded him, and he scraped by working for a repertory theatre company. Paulo was the handsomest person Stefan knew, yet he was so uncomfortable about his looks, his race, or something, that Stefan thought of him as an “ugly beautiful person”. No matter how much adulation Stefan and the others gave him, he seemed set on his unhappiness. The group figured that somehow people picked up on this, which explained his perpetual singledom. After the blind date where they met, Stefan reported, “He’s a beautiful prince you kiss who turns into a poisonous frog”. Their early mutual disinterest made it easy to slip immediately into friendship.

“Where’s Rick?” asked Stefan. Rick rounded out Stefan’s triumvirate of friends.

“He called Allen’s cell about ten minutes ago to say he’d be a bit late,” said Paulo.

“He just finished up a contract on Bay Street.”

“Holy crap,” said Stefan, “not one of those big bank buildings.”

“Yeah,” replied Allen, “he got the contract for the tower I work in.”

“Oh yeah. Did you have anything to do with that?” asked Stefan.

“Well, I told him it was up for renewal. But he won the bid on his own.”

“Can you imagine hanging up there on one of those little platforms?” asked Paulo.

“And where do they get the water from?”

The three of them sat in silence, trying to figure it out. Allen gave up first, and asked how the others’ days went. Paulo described a workshop he was participating in, then Stefan recapped his day at the studio. “I think they’re going to can me,” he said. Not knowing how

to respond, Allen went on to describe his day with a group of estate inheritors bickering over their shares. Allen didn't mind, he said, because he got paid out of the estate for every moment they spent arguing with each other.

"Hey guys," said Rick, coming up the stairs, "how's it going?" They greeted him as he slumped down into a chair. "That was the hardest day I've spent since I started doing this," he said, sipping on a paper cup of coffee the size of a sandcastle bucket. "I don't know if I can keep this contract. It's just too much work."

"Why don't you hire some other people to work for you?" Allen often harangued Rick on this point whenever Rick took on a tone of nobility about being overworked. "It's your business, and as long as you do all the work it will never get any bigger than you."

"If I pay extra people, there won't be enough of a profit left over."

Allen flipped up his *Okay, nevermind* hands.

"Hey, Stef," said Rick, "I wrote another song last night."

"That's great."

"What's it about?" asked Paulo.

"Oh, well, it's — it's kind of hard to explain. I mean, it's kind of reductive to take something as personal as a song and, you know, sum it up."

"Okay," said Allen, "so what kind of song is it?"

"It doesn't really fall into a category, exactly. It's — I dunno. I'll play it for you guys sometime." He turned to Stefan. "Do you think you could talk to one of your mom's people for me?"

Stefan squirmed. "You should really finish your demo first. They can't do anything for you if you haven't got a demo. And I don't know if her agent is really the right person for you. I mean, she's considered folk, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," said Rick. "I've gotta get that demo finished. I swear I'm going to do it first thing in the new year."

"That's great," said Stefan. The others made sounds of approval. Stefan regretted the thought, but was satisfied that he'd never have to present anything to anyone if he waited for Rick to finish the demo of his songs. They were good, the ones he'd heard, though most of them were about his ex-girlfriend. She'd been around for about a year, and sometimes he'd take her out with them, clutching to her to assert his straightness like a love-doll personal flotation device. Then she left for Japan or Malaysia or wherever it was, leaving their relationship sufficiently open-ended for him to imagine it was still going on.

"I hate my job," said Rick.

"Then stop doing it," replied Allen.

"Easy for you to say. You've got buckets of money in the bank."

"Yeah, but I made it. It's not like somebody just gave it to me."

"I think," said Stefan, "that by the time you reach thirty, you're kind of set money-wise. Like, you're poor-thirty or rich-thirty, and it's probably not going to change."

"Oh God," said Paulo. Rick moaned in agreement.

"So which are you?" Allen asked Stefan.

"I guess I'm poor-thirty."

"Ha!" laughed Rick. "That's a good one."

"What? You mean because of my mother?" Stefan shifted in his chair. "She's not that rich, you know. She still has to keep doing records and shows, or we'd be sunk. And besides, just because she has money doesn't mean I do. It's not mine, you know. All my money comes from doing the voice-over work. Soon I might not even have that."

"I still don't think you're poor-thirty," said Rick casually over his drink.

"I don't like this idea," said Allen. "I think that people are always free to be as successful as they want to be. They just don't bother trying."

"Listen to you," said Rick, turning to face him. "You're so self-righteous about your success."

"Yeah, and you're self-righteous about your lack of it."

The evening was supposed to be fun and festive, but at this rate Stefan imagined them going home at the end of it hating each other, so he changed the subject. “Hey, we should get moving if we’re going to make our supper reservation. Let’s go get a cab.”

~

“Surprise!” yelled a large group of people at the back of the bar. Supper had gone into overtime, so even the fashionably late were there when they brought Allen in. He was genuinely surprised, his blue eyes wide open with joy as various people from different parts of his life made their way forward to congratulate him. Allen was out in every possible way, so he had no qualms about them meeting in a gay bar. Stefan, on the other hand, hadn’t mentioned it at work. He didn’t ever mention it if it wasn’t necessary, and took a secret enjoyment from situations where people didn’t know or made mistakes about him. (When his mother was around these misunderstandings were cleared up instantly.)

Stefan pulled back from the crowd, happy for his friend, trying not to think about himself in relation to Allen’s situation. He started for the bar, but changed direction and headed downstairs to the bathroom, dodging the urinals at the last moment when he saw someone else standing there (not wanting to be presumed to be cruising, even though he found the thought intriguing). The right-hand stall was free, and he darted in. He sat and sighed, looking at the graffiti on the stall’s floor-length chalkboard walls, telephone numbers he would never call, propositions that sounded interesting or frightening. Most of them were old and smeared, and though he was tempted to write something, he couldn’t see any chalk. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

When he opened them, he gasped. The four walls around him were covered from the acoustic ceiling to the wet tiled floor with an intricate chalk sketch of a city. Spires rose and columns held fast, and the black of the walls was incorporated into the ancient brickwork. Between the buildings wound little alleys and walkways. Even the streets were made of bricks. In the distance were hills rendered with green chalk, shaded in with patches of purple.

Stefan poked a finger to the wall and drew it back. His fingertip held a circle of white powder, and one of the buildings now had an extra window.

Wherever this place was, for whatever reason he’d been shown it, Stefan was in love.

~

He staggered home several hours later, his head and his belly sloshing with beer. He’d hoped the walk would settle him, but he made it from the downtown neon and billboards and pixelboards blazing their promises, through the Annex with its subtler, earthier urban alternative offerings, to the tree-lined street where he lived, and he was still drunk.

He quietly made his way through the house to his room, took off his shoes and changed into soft old gym clothes to sleep in. His bed, though, turned out to be too unsteady, and he immediately sat upright again, breathing deeply to steady himself. He put a hand under his shirt to touch his stomach. It was cold. It gurgled. *This will not be good*, he thought. Looking down, he saw something there in his belly-button. He pulled it out, a piece of feathery old paper. On it were the letters DIN. He placed it in the dish on his bedside table with the other. *Dine?* he wondered.

He tried to lie down again, but his stomach moved like a washing machine. He put on his coat and padded upstairs, past the main floor up to the second floor. He thanked a higher power as he passed his mother’s bedroom that the door was closed, and continued through to the office. The room was already cluttered, but now it overflowed with Cerise’s boxes and music things. Stefan tripped over and toppled more things in direct proportion to how careful he tried to be, but he reached the window at the front of the house, opened it, and eased himself out.

Stefan sat there for a while on the prickly tar-shingled roof, looking past the tops of the trees at the illuminated building blocks of the city and the humbler stars beyond. He thought of Allen and his life — the job, the partner, the well-decorated condominium. *I don't want that*, he thought, *but I do want something*.

He thought of the chalk city he saw. It had to be out in the world somewhere.

Maybe.

He thought of the voice he heard so often. It was just one voice. So it had to belong to somebody.

Maybe.

His silent laugh made a cloud in front of him. The answer to the maybes was so simple:

I have to run away from home.

Chapter Three

Guardians

“Jean?” asked Wendy, poking her head around the open Green Room door. She saw Stefan and looked for someone else in the room. “I thought I heard Jean in here.”

Stefan smiled and put down the script he was studying. “Pretty good, eh?”

“That was you? Yeah, that was very good.”

“Thanks. It was hard to find the right blend of shrew, harpy, and eel, but I think I’ve finally got her down.”

Wendy smiled weakly, skipping over the comment to preserve her neutrality.

“Chuck’s ready for you to put down your dialogue in Number Five.”

“Okay, thanks.” Stefan picked up his things and headed down the hall. In the sound booth, he set his gear up on the music stand, picked up his sides, and positioned himself carefully next to the microphone. He stretched his mouth wide open, made an exaggerated movement like a camel chewing, then gave the sound technician a thumbs-up sign. A red light illuminated on the microphone and Stefan took a deep breath to speak. The sound booth door opened and Jean the producer entered. Stefan exhaled.

“Sorry,” she said, “I just had a meeting with lawyers and one of the writers, and we came up with a revised copy of today’s script. Here you go Stefan. Sorry for the short notice.”

Stefan was about to launch into a complaint, but found himself empty. Why should he care? He was leaving. He had no idea where to, or how he was going to manage it, but the idea had clicked into place, and he was as good as gone. Jean held out the sheets of paper. Stefan smiled at her and took them. He riffled through them, his eyebrows raising reflexively, little “Hmms” vibrating from his mouth at intervals. He read bits of the revisions aloud: “With bioengineering it will be possible to feed the world... Nuclear energy continues to be the cleanest, most efficient way to produce electricity...” He turned to Jean and smiled again. “Great!”

She cocked her head, looked at him for a moment, then said, “Oh. Well, okay then. I’ll be in my office.” At the door, she took another look back at Stefan, paused, then left.

The work went easily for the rest of the day, and Jean didn’t interrupt again. Stefan wondered why he hadn’t thought of the ‘go limp’ approach before. Luckily, his conscience left him alone, perhaps because of his mind’s preoccupation with the recent change in plans.

~

DINEGHRU. Stefan rubbed his eyes and looked at the little wisps of paper. Breathing carefully so he wouldn’t blow them off his side-table, he placed this morning’s down, the letter B. *DINEGHRUB.* *Oh,* he thought, *that’s much clearer.*

He went upstairs, intending to have a shower, but his mother stopped him along the way. “Stefan,” she said, “you’re just in time to have breakfast with us!” He sat at the table, his hunger overriding his discomfort at the idea. His mother’s Saturday breakfasts were his favourite meal of the week. She scooped and sliced and arranged, then brought over a heaping plate of wheat-free, eggless, milkless pancakes, fat-free, meatless mock-bacon, and fried potatoes — actual potatoes. The ‘bacon’ made him gassy, but he did actually enjoy it. He liked all of his mother’s synthetic cooking. Being so familiar with it, he found the real-world inspirations for his mother’s food analogies odd, foreign. (Though he regularly ordered double-helpings of real bacon when he ate out with friends as a little stand for his independence, despite the queasy and guilty feelings that followed.)

Cerise’s gown flowed as she approached the table, making her look like a husky piece of artwork that had escaped before being properly unveiled. “Good morning,” she said to them both, lingering with a knowing look to Delonia. She sat to Stefan’s right, in his father’s seat. The table in the kitchen was square, though, and not large, so he let the transgression

pass. Had she taken the other seat she'd be sitting opposite him, and that would be a more pressing annoyance.

"Good morning," said Delonia, carrying plates over for herself and Cerise, leaning down to give Cerise a kiss on the cheek as she put her plate down. Stefan spurted orange juice back into his glass. He wiped his mouth and cleared his throat. "So are you almost ready for your Christmas show, Mom?" he asked.

"Almost. We haven't filled the third guest slot yet, and we've got a few more rehearsals to do. Oh, which reminds me: are you free to pick me up on Monday night at the studio?"

"Oh," he said, as if his plans would be horribly compromised, although he had none.

"You know I wouldn't ask you, but you know, since I can't drive—"

What a fiasco that was, he remembered, Canada's first lady of song (okay, fourth, fifth, or maybe eighth) being arrested on 'Driving Under the Influence' charges. The memory of the press mania over the event made Stefan uncomfortable, embarrassed for her. She knew this, he was sure, and used it for leverage in such situations. She'd also happened to give him her car after the incident — not that it was of any use to her without a license, and she was committed to its lease, so the gift wasn't the act of largesse she liked to suggest. Still, he couldn't come up with a good excuse for not helping her.

"All right," he said, "what time is the rehearsal over?"

"We should be finished by 10pm," she said.

"So will I get you at the bar?"

"Oh, that would be nice. You can say hello to the crew."

Mmm, he thought, *great*: the union stage crew who'd known him since birth and took such pleasure in teasing him. They loved to drink with his mother, even though they knew better. Despite the facts, though, Stefan never played the "my mother's an alcoholic" card, since it was so expected of famous people's children. And other than the car accident, drinking was more of an occasional hobby for her than a problem, not even dramatic enough to warrant sympathy or special treatment. He had no excuses, he thought as he reached for a gluten-free biscuit, for not having made more of his life. In fact, he had a lot of advantages, so he should stop being such a...

A foot rested on his. He looked to his mother, who chewed absently on fruit salad. With effort he resisted looking at Cerise, until the foot started wiggling. He gave her a look with flared eyes. She pulled her foot away, her hand flying to her mouth as her face flushed.

Stefan let his fork clatter to his plate and stormed from the table. Delonia, surprised, followed after him, down the stairs. She reached his bedroom door before he could slam it.

"What," she demanded, "is the matter with you?"

"Your girlfriend made a pass at me that was intended for you."

"Oh," said Delonia with a giggle.

"You don't love her," declared Stefan.

"What?"

"Mom, you're not a lesbian. She's just the first person to get close to you since Dad died. I think you're confused."

"Wh— I— You don't know the first thing about it. How could you? Why don't you move out and rent a nice little closet somewhere? Isn't that what you'd like?"

"Mom, just because you're all liberal and stuff doesn't mean you can be a lesbian at will. You're not gay, you're just lonely."

She turned and left his room without another word. He wondered if his point had struck home. It was just a guess. If it was true, though, he'd just injected a doubt into his mother's relationship. *So she's fooled herself into being happy, so what? That's still happiness, isn't it?* he thought. *Why did I do that?* He was defending his father. Or something. Or was he feeling jealous? *Of my mother's lover? Eew. I have to get out of here*, he thought, *and soon*.

~

On the way out of the house, he'd grabbed his mail from the front hallway shelf where his mother had stacked it. He tore the envelopes open one by one as he sipped on a soft drink in the giant food court of a downtown mall. Pixel-boards moved with images of happy shoppers carrying bags and laughing as they encountered each other. Ultra-cool kids skateboarded, sank basketballs in hoops, and kicked footballs in their spacey-looking sneakers, conveniently available for a hundred and some dollars at the store next to the sign. Background music and voices of real shoppers formed a blanket of sound around him. But he was used to it all; the flashing lights and the noise didn't consciously register for him. He lifted a gravy-soaked French-fry and angled it into his mouth as he unfolded yet another bill.

Credit cards, his loan, the various music clubs he was committed to — Stefan looked over the papers with their totals in bold black ink. How would he pay all this off? Never mind the fact that he didn't know where he planned to go, how could he ever get free of all the debt hanging over his head?

He wouldn't ask his mother for help. On this he was resolute. He wondered how he could come up with the kind of money he needed.

He'd insured his voice at his mother's suggestion. Perhaps he could — *No. That's silly*, he thought. For one, he couldn't imagine how to stage a 'voice accident'. Then there was the awkwardness of not being able to speak, which he didn't suppose he could handle. *Not worth it*, he figured, *for the sake of getting rid of some debt. How much debt?* he wondered. He pulled over his gravy-stained napkin, took out a pen, and listed all his financial liabilities in a column. As he added them, his spirits sank. When the total came out in only four figures, he sighed with relief, but resigned himself to the facts: this idea of leaving was stupid and unrealistic. If he kept going at this pace, the bills could stay at arm's length. But getting rid of them altogether was impossible.

Stefan gathered up the bills and shoved them into his coat pocket. He was supposed to go out with the boys that night, he remembered. That would be good for him — a few drinks, some dancing, their company.

He leaned back in his plastic chair and sipped the last of his soft drink, wondering if a new pair of sneakers would make him feel better. Maybe if he had those he would get into shape. And being in shape — well, he had a vague sense that it was good for something. *I should join a gym*, he thought. It would probably be expensive, but it was something he was supposed to do.

~

Stefan put the sneakers on his bed next to the shirt he bought for that night's outing. He took the receipts from his pocket and looked at them. *What have I done?* he thought. *I'm in the hole, and the first thing I do is grab for a shovel.*

If he was staying, it didn't matter. Was he staying?

That's a nice shirt, though.

He left the matter and got changed into his outfit for the evening. The shirt looked good on him, made him look kind of adorable — the best he could hope for. The running shoes had that nice new spring to them, which would be fun for dancing.

~

"Hey," said Stefan, joining Rick and Paulo. Rick wore one of his saggy 'serious outsider musician' outfits, far too haphazard for the gay scene. He wasn't available and didn't care, so at least two or three people on any given night out asked Stefan "What's your friend's name? Does he have a boyfriend?" When particularly frustrated, Stefan would answer honestly: "No, he doesn't," omitting the detail of Rick's overseas not-really-a-girlfriend.

Paulo wore a powder blue short-sleeved shirt he'd ironed perfectly before going out. (Somehow he never got cold, as if carrying the heat of a foreign climate in his blood, even though he'd never lived outside Canada.) His forehead was a perfect shore for the wet black waves of his hair. While the rest of their gang faded to a winter pallor, Paulo stayed a perfect summer gold. His looks had such a general appeal and, combined with a misreading of his shy air of self-deprecation, everyone assumed he operated in some aloof, unreachable league, and no one but his friends approached him.

"Where's Allen?" asked Stefan.

"Over there, talking to Adam," said Paulo, pointing. "Do you remember him? He's a journalist, writes for the financial section of one of the national papers, I can't remember which. Yeah, that's Adam."

"Look at you, you're swooning, you big geek," chided Rick.

"Sorry," said Paulo, turning back to them.

"No, it's cute," said Rick. "He's a nice-looking guy."

"I bet he's really got it together," said Paulo.

"You mean he wouldn't go for an actor-slash-cater-waiter," added Stefan.

"Well, come on, really," said Paulo. "He probably lives on the harbourfront in some beautiful condo with his perfect boyfriend."

"One way to find out," said Rick. "Hey Allen!" he called across the bar, and gestured for Allen and Adam to come over. They all said their hellos, and Rick made a particular point of introducing Adam and Paulo.

"Oh, we've met before," said Adam, smiling. "I distinctly remember that."

~

"He's a really nice guy," said Stefan, looking at Paulo and Adam, who sat in a corner, wrapped up in discussion punctuated with joking touches on the arm or hand that would inevitably lead to more.

"Paulo would have to work really hard to screw this up," said Allen. "Adam is so interested in the arts. I think it's because he's a fundamentally un-artistic person by nature — he's so left-brained sometimes it's a wonder he doesn't fall over. So he really appreciates that creative spark in other people. Besides, look at Paulo, he's a stunner."

"You should tell him that."

Allen smiled. "That's a nice idea. I will." He took a sip of his lemonade drink. "So that just leaves you."

"What?"

"Well, with Paulo fixed up, you're the only one of us who's single."

Stefan pushed back from the table. "I don't see that as something that needs fixing."

"Stef, I know you want that in your life. If you were happy being single, I'd leave it alone. But it's obvious that you're not happy."

"And it's up to you to correct this, is it?"

Allen waved a hand. "I'm just going to drop it, because now you're getting huffy."

"I'm getting a drink, is what I'm doing," said Stefan, getting up. "You want one?"

"Sure."

"Another one of your girlie-pops, or would you like something else?"

"Gin and tonic," said Allen.

"Oh, that's *much* better."

Stefan headed for the bar. Rick darted up to his side and said a word of warning — "Ming" — then dashed away again. Stefan looked around. *Where?*

Stefan's stomach turned into a pitcher of ice-water. There he was, Stefan's ex, the one his friends called Ming the Merciless, owing to the particular style he sported these days, with a trimmed little moustache and beard, a head shaven as a first strike against male pattern baldness, and a penchant for black clothes. As Stefan understood it, usually the person who'd been

dumped underwent a change of image — a sudden interest in fitness, a new haircut, piercing, tattoo, wardrobe — but in their case Ming did all the work while Stefan retreated, back into his old circle of friends, back into his old hobbies, back into his mother's house.

Already in the queue at the bar, Stefan was trapped. Ming spotted him and headed over with someone in tow. Stefan never told Ming how hurt he was, accepting instead the terms he'd been offered, the plastic olive branch of post-romance friendship. Ming wasn't to be blamed for thinking that Stefan wanted to see him, to talk to him, even if he didn't want to do either ever again. Each encounter left Stefan feeling belittled, defeated, and lost. He felt dread, knowing it was about to happen again.

"Stefffff-an!" said Ming, hugging him with hard slaps on the back. "I'm so happy to see you. Stefan," he said, yelling sharply into Stefan's ear, turning to the man he'd towed here. "This is Michael. Michael, this is Stefan." His tone implied "the one I've told you so much about", but Stefan could see from Michael's face he'd been told nothing about their two years together, since they played no appreciable part in Ming's memory.

They shook hands. Stefan took guilty comfort for a moment in finding the new boyfriend ugly. Then he felt further hurt that — ugliness notwithstanding — this person was still his replacement.

The bartender thumped the bar. Stefan turned and yelled, ordering Allen's drink and asking for a double of his own drink.

"Oh," said Ming, raising an eyebrow, "who's the other drink for?" Stefan gestured back to Allen, who waved and gave a big smile, knowing that Ming never approved of Stefan's friends, for reasons none of them managed to figure out before the relationship ended. This disinclined them to him in the first place, but the subsequent badly-handled dumping raised the stakes to full-on hatred. Stefan's friends made a pretence of fawning over Ming whenever they had a chance, knowing that it had a salt-on-a-slug effect on him.

The bartender sloshed Stefan's drinks down and called out the price. Stefan rounded up, tipping the man out of habit, though the glasses were sloppy with spillage that dribbled down onto his trouser-legs. Noticing this, Stefan found his exit: "Well, I better — Nice to meet you, Michael. Min — Jason, good to see you." Ming reached to hug Stefan. Stefan looked at his drinks and shrugged.

~

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know, Allen, I thought he was with you," said Rick.

"Was he okay? Or was he upset?" asked Paulo, holding hands with Adam as they all walked toward the pizza shop where they ended their nights out.

"Maybe he went home," said Adam.

The others laughed. "No," said Rick, "that's the last place he'd go if he was upset." He looked to Allen, "Was he upset? We're all kind of operating on this foregone conclusion."

"Ming was there," said Allen.

"Ah," said Rick and Paulo at the same time. Adam looked confused.

"There he is," said Paulo, pointing.

Stefan stood leaned inside a telephone booth, his eyes closed, the receiver still next to his ear.

Allen ran over to him, helping him back to a standing position, hanging up the receiver. "What were you doing?" he whispered as Stefan's eyes fluttered blearily.

"Listening," said Stefan.

~

Stefan decided he wasn't up for dragging his mother out of a bar, particularly not on a Monday night, so he showed up at the rehearsal early. He walked carefully across the soundstage's

rubberised black floor, keeping a low profile as he found a metal chair in a corner from which he could watch without interrupting.

His mother was singing a number, something written specifically for this television special. Stefan thought it very pretty, and smiled as he leaned back in his chair. Delonia was talented, he'd never contest that fact. If his mother had to be famous, at least she was *good* and famous. Sure people hated her specials or found the things she did too cheesy or sentimental (most people found them too cheesy or sentimental). But there were moments like this when he was proud of her.

She wound up for the song's big finishing note, and Stefan fell backward, his legs kicking in the air. The chair, which no one was using for a reason, clanged on the floor, its legs akimbo like Stefan's.

Delonia, who'd seen Stefan come in, stopped singing and laughed. "Thanks, Neil," she said in the direction of the sound booth window on the far side of the soundstage. The orchestra members put down their bows and instruments and stared at Stefan as he righted himself and waved.

A voice popped in from nowhere. "Let's try the number with Christopher." Delonia nodded, and a boy of twelve walked out onstage in trendy, expensive clothing. He was blond and had a knowing teen-star-to-be sexiness that made Stefan uneasy.

Delonia gestured for Stefan to join her in the spotlight centre of the holiday set. He shook his head, but she insisted. He ran up and gave her a quick kiss.

"Hey, Stefan," said the disembodied voice.

"Hey, Neil." Then he looked up, as if to heaven, and said, "Hey Tim, Rob." He yelled at the set, "Hey Raj, hey Marlene." Voices responded from around the studio.

"Ready?" Delonia asked the young man standing next to her in a tone too childish for a modern pre-teen. She reached down, ruffled his blond hair, and smiled.

"I'm ready," he said, "just don't sing flat this time."

Delonia's eyes flared. Her mouth opened and closed, showing her large teeth as she struggled for something to say. She looked around the stage at her peers, then put a hand to her face and walked quickly off the set. Stefan was surprised: in her heyday Delonia would have barked the boy off the stage, or simply upstaged him to the point that he vanished in the light of her talent. But tonight her defences were down, and the boy had struck her to the quick.

Stefan leaned down to the young entertainer's height. "You know what, little man? In a year, two tops, your voice is going to change. And then you're fucked. Then when you want to make a comeback, you're going to have to grovel for all you're worth. But people have long memories around here, and you'll be lucky to get a gig as a backup choir member for someone as talented and gracious as that woman. She's been around for a long time, and that's with good reason. You'll be lucky if you ever see this place again." He started after his mother, but turned back to the boy. "Oh, and another thing. You're gay." Then he ran from the soundstage. "Mom?" he asked, opening the dressing room door. He found her waving a smoking bundled of sticks in the air. He coughed. "What the hell is that?"

"Sage. It clears the energy in the room."

"And probably turns on the sprinklers," he said, grabbing in and taking it to the little bathroom, where he dropped it in the toilet. He sat Delonia down and took a seat opposite her. "What's the matter? Normally you would have snapped that little pre-teen bitch in two."

"I'm not sure," she said, wiping her eyes. "I've been touchy the last couple of days. I think it's what you said about Cerise. I've been wondering if maybe you were right."

"No, Mom, I've been thinking about that, too. I shouldn't have said it. What do I know, eh? If you're happy, then that's the truth, that's all that matters."

"Oh I'm so glad you feel that way. Because last night she asked me to marry her."

"But — but Mom, you're married to Dad."

"Stefan, your father's been dead for over twenty years."

"Mom, you said 'Till death do us part'."

“Yes, and he’s dead.”

Stefan stood, shaking his head.

“Stefan, please, we want you to be part of this. Cerise thinks that this could be a very important event. What if it were televised? And you and someone special were there at the altar to give me away? That would mean so much to both of us. And imagine what that would mean for our society, to see me and you embracing our true natures and each other that way. Maybe you and Jason might get back together, and we could all live together in our house.”

“Look, that’s never going to happen. I think you’re a crazy woman,” said Stefan, “and I have to get out of here.”

“But you’re here to drive me home.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I’m ready to go back in there now,” said Delonia. “I won’t be long.” She gathered herself and left.

Stefan looked around the dressing room. Posters for old shows were dry-mounted on the wall, including one featuring his parents which had faded into tones of rusty brown. A dress in a stereotypically North American Indian pattern hung from Delonia’s frame. She had one leg stepped forward through a slit in the dress and her hair was pulled back from her heavily made-up face by a beaded headband. Stefan winced at the idea of his mother as sex symbol. His father wore a leisure suit and a warm, completely guileless smile beamed from his beard. Stefan touched the smile. From nowhere, a word popped into his head: *Edinburgh*.

He knew what the letters on his bedside table were trying to spell, and he knew where he had to go.

Chapter Four

Nearest Exit

“Mom, what are you doing?” asked Stefan.

Delonia looked up from the small towel she held. “I’m doing your laundry,” she replied.

“I didn’t ask you to do that. I don’t want you to do that. Could you please get out of my room?”

Delonia smiled. “What’s this?” she asked, holding up the towel, which seemed to hold its crumpled shape against gravity. “Somebody’s been hiding something. Is there someone I should know about? A guest you’ve been sneaking in? Hmm? What’s this?” She shook the petrified thing.

“I can’t believe this,” said Stefan, banging his head on the doorframe. He threw the mail he’d carried in with him down on the bed. “Mom, it’s semen. There, is that what you wanted to hear? And it’s mine, just mine. Alright? Now that I’m completely bereft of any dignity, could you please get the hell out of here?”

“Oh,” She dropped the towel into the laundry basket, “well at least I know you’re human. You know, you don’t give many outward signs.”

“What? I’m living my life. So what if I’m not in a relationship or having real sex? What do I need those for? Why do you keep pushing this? Relationships are just people’s way of avoiding their mortality. As long as they’re caught up in all the romance of it and busying themselves with paying attention to this other personality, they can hide out from the fact that one day they’re going to die. It’s the ultimate denial of the responsibility each of us has for figuring out what life is for.”

Delonia raised her eyebrows. “Ooh, listen to you! That’s a bit cynical, don’t you think?”

“Is it? Think about it: people sit in office buildings pacified by gushy love songs on the radio all week, then come Friday night we’re out on the town trying to have those experiences ourselves, perfectly distracted from the plight of our fellow man or the vicious activities of our government. Then on Saturday we go to the cinema to watch scripts we’re supposed to aspire to living out. You *sing* those songs! Do you really think they describe actual experience, or are they really about what we *wished* we felt like?”

“Stefan,” said Delonia, taking his hands and sitting down with him on his bed, “I have to say that you don’t know what you’re talking about. And that makes me sad.”

“Oh, right, because if only I knew true love I would join you and all those people on a hillside singing happy love songs, right?”

Delonia smiled and touched Stefan’s arm. She closed her eyes, then opened them, looking at the centre of Stefan’s chest. She pointed a single finger there and tapped him hard. “Unfold,” she said, addressing the spot.

Stefan rolled his eyes.

It wasn’t precisely fair, he knew, but he still felt the anger of exposure from her intrusion, so he pulled out the big guns: “There’s a bunch of birthday cards here for you,” he said, handing her the mail he’d grabbed on the way downstairs. “I think one of them is from Grandpa.” He watched her face fall as he gave her the envelopes.

She looked at them, feigning nonchalance, but pulled out the one yellow envelope with her father’s large, scrawled writing on its front and stared at it. Without a word, she left the room. His gambit had the intended result, and he hated himself for using it.

Stefan didn’t even know what the rift was between his mother and her father, but it was something he’d seen her levelled by again and again. The effect didn’t lessen with time.

Stefan looked at the tiny newsprint slips on his bedside table arranged into the word ‘Edinburgh’. (They’d stopped appearing since Monday when he’d formed them into that name.) He was happy his mother hadn’t disturbed them or asked about them. She was the last person he’d want to talk to about all this.

Just as Delonia's father was the last person she would want to speak to. Stefan felt a sudden compulsion to visit the man.

~

Stefan drove through the streets of the reservation, self-conscious of the car's tiny size and sporty lines in the midst of all the pickup trucks and muscle cars. The bungalows all had muddy yards, some with dogs tied up in them. Driving here had taken two days, but last night's quiet evening on his own in a roadside motel had a rejuvenating effect on him. Stefan liked being on the move, and enjoyed the idea that no one knew where he was. Shifting his recording schedule had been easy, too. The only disconcerting thing was this destination.

Of all the parts of his makeup Stefan was uncomfortable about, this one — the "Indian" connection — was the most awkward. His opinions about the First Nations, the Indians, the Native Canadians, or whatever he was supposed to call them, whatever some fraction of him was supposed to be, were all received ones. His mother benefited from the association, as it added something exotic and quintessentially Canadian to her image. But the truth was that she left home in her teens to pursue her career and left behind everything about this world. She was only one-quarter Métis to begin with, hardly much of a claim. Stefan's connection was even more tenuous.

He'd heard too many one-sided, self-assured conversations about free tuition, gun running, tax exemption, cigarette smuggling, land claims, casinos, and suicide to want to have anything to do with it. It certainly had nothing to do with him.

Yet here he was, Stefan J. Mackechnie, pulling up to the house of Thomas Jackrabbit, source of Stefan's never-divulged middle name. The one-story house stood next to the school where Thomas taught until his retirement.

Stefan pulled up the parking brake and got out of the car. An old German Shepherd made its way to him, its back haunches lowered by degenerated hips. It sniffed at him, then nuzzled its head familiarly under Stefan's hand. Surely it didn't remember him, he thought. They'd only visited twice, and those visits were a long time ago. *Perhaps dogs don't forget these things.* His grandfather, though, was another matter, peering out between the living room curtains suspiciously. Stefan waved, but his grandfather clearly didn't know who he was.

Stefan went to the front door and rang the bell, an awkward formality, given that they both knew the other was there.

"Yes?" asked Thomas, opening the inner door but not the screen door.

"Hello," said Stefan.

Clearly Stefan wasn't a government person, wearing such casual clothes and driving such a sporty car. But he was big city, certainly not from any of the towns nearby. Thomas was at a loss.

"Grandpa, it's me."

The man looked him up and down. Thomas's mouth formed the name: *Robert*? The surprise passed to Stefan: he hadn't considered that he might look like his father.

"Yeah, he was my dad. We visited you years ago. I'm Stefan."

Thomas's face brightened. "Stefan! Come on in!" He opened both doors wide and put an arm around Stefan, leading him into the living room. The air smelled tired, rebreathed many times over. The space was a mix of eras — a battered, soft, and shapeless old orange couch sat next to a lamp with a handmade shade like a stretched scrapbook; then, opposite them, a giant television and a video game console. Thomas saw Stefan looking at this incredulously. "Oh, that. No, I'm no good at all those games. I keep getting my ass kicked. They're for the kids."

"Kids?" asked Stefan.

"Sit," said Thomas. He walked with some difficulty, like an overstuffed pillow on spindly legs. His grey and black hair was neatly pulled back. His face was weathered and wrinkled, the kind of face, Stefan thought with some discomfort, you usually see in a casket.

But the expression was all comfort and ease here at home. “Not my kids. My kids are all grown. I mean the children who come by after school. I teach them some extra French, and I try to cover things I think they should know but don’t get in the standard curriculum. In exchange, I get to learn from them about new things in the world I wouldn’t hear about otherwise, and I let them use that video thing. I tell them to show respect for their elders, but they’re forever blowing my head off.”

Stefan laughed. He liked the man.

“Would you like anything?” asked Thomas. “I’ve got any kind of fruit juice you could imagine. I don’t keep liquor or beer, and pop is terrible for the kids. Won’t give it to them. Makes them wrangy as all hell and then I can’t deal with them.”

“An orange juice would be good.”

“What? Nothing more interesting, like pineapple or mango or passionfruit?”

“Oh. Okay, then,” said Stefan with a smirk, “I’ll take pineapple.”

Thomas came back from the kitchen a few minutes later with tall glasses filled with ice and juice. Thomas’s was some other kind, something reddish-purple. “So,” said Thomas, lowering himself with difficulty into a favourite old chair, looking straight at Stefan with a piercing intensity, “what’re you doing here?”

Stefan looked at the floor. “I’m not sure. I was hoping you might help me.”

“What do you need? I don’t have much. I thought your mother was doing pretty well for herself.”

“No, not that kind of help. It’s more like advice I’m looking for.”

“Ah, I see,” said the man, his face collapsing around a frown.

“What?” asked Stefan.

“So you figured you’d go talk to an old Indian, right?”

“No, it’s not that—” Stefan’s stomach wobbled and his face burned. “I wasn’t consciously thinking that, anyway.”

“That I’m old,” said Thomas, “doesn’t necessarily mean I know anything. It just means I’m likely to be opinionated. And being from the First Nations, that doesn’t make me wise. Give me a break. We don’t have any more of a claim on wisdom than anyone else. I mean, look around this reservation. You don’t think these people are just as lost? The trucks, the gadgets — just shiny objects for crows.”

Stefan nodded and covered one of his new sneakers with the other.

“I am, however,” he said, sitting forward in his chair, “a teacher. It’s in my bones. So maybe you’re in luck. The question stands: what are you doing here?”

Stefan wasn’t sure how much to tell him. “Well, you know my father’s dead, right?”

“I heard about it at the time. On the news.”

“Mom didn’t—? I’m sorry, Grandpa. I’m sorry we haven’t been in touch. I don’t know why. What is it between you and her?”

“Son, if she hasn’t told you, it’s not my place to. She’s my baby, you know, and I’ll never give up. Do you know if she talks to her brothers at all?”

“No. She never mentions them.”

“At least she’s got you,” said Thomas.

“Yeah,” said Stefan, “see, that’s the thing. She drives me crazy. There’s this woman living — well, things at home all are strange and claustrophobic, and everywhere else I go there’s my mother looming over me because everyone knows who she is or thinks they do, and I think I’m going to quit my job soon because I’m wondering about going off somewhere, leaving.” He stopped to breathe, and looked at his grandfather. “The thing is, I think my dad has something to do with it.”

“Oh,” said Thomas, sitting back.

“I know, I know. You’re the first person I’ve told.” He described the letter he wrote to his father and the things that had happened since.

Stefan watched as Thomas scratched his head, then sipped his juice, looking out the front window. Thomas took everything he’d said in stride, and that made Stefan feel better.

After a few minutes, Thomas looked back at Stefan. "You should settle down in that job you have. Are you married?" Stefan shook his head 'no'. "You should get married." Stefan laughed. Thomas continued. "What? You think I'm kidding? I'm serious. If you do this, then all these disturbances will go away." Thomas leaned forward. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

Stefan opened his mouth. He shook his head and shrugged. "I don't know," he finally managed.

"You need to get away from other people for a while," said Thomas, "in order to find out for yourself what you should do. Go out on your own somewhere where you can be alone, and test it out, see if it feels right. Do you remember the second time you visited and we all went camping? I think that's what you should do. It's the cliché Indian sort of thing you wanted me tell you to do, so — who knows? — there's probably something to it."

"But Grandpa, it's November."

"I've got lots of old gear in the garage I can lend you, and the weather's still mild. You'll be fine. And when you come back, all this nonsense will be out of your head and you can get back to your life."

"Yeah," said Stefan. "Good idea. Thanks."

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Stefan shopped at the general store where he'd arranged to pick up a canoe. He couldn't help himself once he started buying things. He bought snacks and sweets, bread, a dozen eggs, tinned kiddie spaghetti, and — the ultimate indulgence — a whole package of bacon to eat all by himself. The canoe fit very badly on the roof of his car, the front hanging like a giant beak, dangerously obscuring his vision. The wind moved it slightly as he drove, and Stefan worried that it might scrape the paint, despite the foam wedges the shop-keeper put between the canoe and the roof when lashing it there.

Reaching the lake, Stefan wrestled the canoe off the roof, doing everything he could to make sure the two didn't come into contact. He danced with it over his head for a moment before tipping backwards, then threw it to keep from falling down. It landed with a sound like a drum and gritted against the powdery gravel landing that led to the lake. Stefan winced. *How much does a canoe cost?* he wondered.

Stefan took the supplies from the car and locked it, looking around for a moment before deciding that it was unlikely anyone would pass within ten miles of here before he got back.

When am I coming back? He hadn't told anyone. *I should have told someone.*

He loaded the mound of goods into the canoe and covered them with an oily old tarpaulin. Then he pushed the boat — with great difficulty — toward the put-in point. He clenched his teeth at the grinding sound of the fibreglass against the ground. The boat moved easily once it reached the water, then threatened to float away before he could get in. He jumped into the back of the canoe, making it dip dangerously. Stefan crawled up to and over the flat seat, tucked his legs under as he sat, then picked up the paddle.

He paddled slowly. It was coming back to him from camp all those years ago, the proper way to move the paddle, dipping and turning. After a while, he felt a blister forming where his thumb rubbed against the varnished wood, and put on his grandfather's large gloves.

He clunked the paddle against the canoe, and corrected by adjusting his weight on the flat seat, refolding his legs. The canoe wobbled and Stefan froze. He had too much gear, he knew it.

The landscape conformed to the map of the lakes he'd been given at the store, and he found the spot they'd circled for him, the one matching his request for someplace where he wouldn't be disturbed by other people.

Portage, the most dreaded French word of his childhood, came back to him when he reached his destination island. He'd had a vague sense of why it was a bad idea to bring so much food and gear, and now he remembered: he had to carry it all over land to get to his

campsite. Three trips got everything to a halfway point, where the ground was uneven, rocky, and covered in undergrowth. But, strangely for an island, there was a picnic table there. *Perfect*, thought Stefan, *I'm staying here*.

~

"Ow," said Stefan, looking at his thumb. The blister burst in the time it took him to make kindling out of leafy twigs and branches using an impractical folding saw (after sending an axe-head deep into the bushes, where he couldn't find it). He lay the kindling down, then built a classic log cabin from the firewood he'd brought in an orange mesh bag. He surrounded it all with rocks. His Cub Scout leader would have been proud.

Stefan dropped one match after another on the pile, and blew and blew on the smouldering brush. He took in a deep breath to give the rubbish a big blast of air, but instead got a lungful of smoke. He stood, coughing, and went to his supplies, digging until he found a small rectangular can. He walked calmly back to the log cabin, unscrewed the cap, and poured out half the contents. He screwed the top back on, put it behind him, and lit a match. He dropped the match into the stone circle and a column fire, Biblical in proportion, flew up toward the treetops overhead. Very shortly after, Stefan was cooking his supper.

Stefan noticed that the cans of spaghetti were five years past their best before date, but, hungry from the work of getting to the island, heated them anyway at the edge of the fire, and fried all the bacon in a pan. He mixed the bacon and spaghetti into a pot, making a carbonara slop of his own invention, which he enjoyed more than any meal he could remember. His mother would be horrified at his meat-eating, and he liked that, as if somehow being not-like-her made him something of his own.

He made his way to the lakeshore to watch the sunset, a vast canopy of sherbet colours — red and orange up to yellow that glittered with the faintest of early stars. He loved the smell of smoke in his heavy clothes with sharp pine always in the background. The sun went down quickly, making black silhouettes of the tree-covered islands around his. The darkness as he walked back to his camp through the trees surprised him. It was *dark*. He wasn't accustomed to that, living in the city, where blinds and curtains never really did the trick.

The fire burned down to embers. He used his fork to scrape the bacon fat from the pan into the ashes, where it sizzled and briefly lit. He enjoyed the smell, thinking defiantly of his hippie mother. *How could you not enjoy that smell?*

That smell.

Bears.

It came back to him now, the constant insistence of his Cub leaders and his grandfather to dispose of food scraps properly so bears wouldn't be attracted to the campsite. Stefan poured water on the fire, creating a great, bacon-scented cloud of steam. He looked around, wondering if there was anything nearby to smell this. He poured on water until the ashes were cool mush, then scooped that into a garbage bag with his hands.

Hang it up.

Yes, that was the proper thing to do, he remembered: hang your food from a tree, away from the campsite, out of reach. Stefan piled all his food onto the tarpaulin along with the bag of bacon-ash-mud. He wiped his hands on his clothes to stop them from being so slippery, tied a thin yellow nylon rope through the grommets in the tarpaulin, then knotted a thick cotton rope to the gathered neck. He picked all this up and walked what he figured was a reasonable distance from his campsite.

He looked at the trees above. The branches were so far away. He looked at the big bundle in his arms, then back at the trees. He spotted a pair of jutting branches — perhaps not regulation bear-height. Something moved in the bushes behind him. *This will do*, he thought. He turned his back to the tree, squatted, and hurled the bundle up as hard as he could, closing his eyes.

He heard a crackle above, and nothing more. He looked up and saw his tarpaulin safely wedged in the tree. Stefan smiled at his efforts, and grabbed for the cotton rope that dangled down. He yanked on it to see if it was secure. It was. In fact, the bundle was stuck. Stefan stood under the tree and pulled hard on the rope. It pulled taut, then snapped free, dropping him to the ground.

Stefan stared at the tarpaulin bag overhead. Its neck opened. Bacon-ash-mud splashed down on him.

Something moved through the growth behind him. Stefan flipped over to look, then jumped up and ran in the other direction, flailing his arms in front of himself to clear a path. After several minutes, Stefan rested, crouched panting on the ground, looking to see if the thing was gone. He realised then that he was lost.

After a time — he couldn't tell how long out here — he found his way back to the camp, changing directions whenever he imagined he heard something close-by. He didn't care how dirty he was, all he wanted was to crawl into his sleeping bag and be unconscious until this night was over. But first he had to put up the tent.

He struggled to get the tangled ropes from the long-unused tent bag, then pulled out the wrinkled, oily, elephant skin of a tent. It smelled like his grandfather had been using it as a drop-cloth. Stefan fished for the pegs at the bottom of the bag. Something moved behind him, and he jumped up with a metal peg in each hand.

Oh crap, he thought, peering into the darkness. A second sound started to his left. *Ohcrapohcrap. Do I make noise? Do I scream? Or am I supposed to play dead? Or do they start eating you if they think you're dead? Is it mating season? Would that be a good thing or a bad thing?* Squinting, he searched the movement ahead. It was low to the ground. Grey. With stripes. Raccoons.

Stefan laughed. Briefly.

The two raccoons continued their approach, and a third entered the clearing. Stefan stamped his feet, but they didn't respond. He yelled at them, but they weren't bothered by that, either. The cold fear crept back into his stomach. *Raccoons are big*, he realised, *and kind of scary*, he decided.

He went back to his supplies with a mission. "Ha!" he said, pulling out a box of flares. He struggled against shaking hands to light two of them. He'd never lit flares before. He expected them to be the pink fireworks he'd seen on the side of the highway, but these were like candles in shotgun casings. Still, they created a good amount of light.

Stefan held the flares in his hands, then stomped about, yelling at the raccoons. It turned into a dance of sorts, and sang at the top of his lungs "Go away ra-coooooons! Get out of my caaaaamp-siiiiiiiite! Get! Get! Get! Get away ra-cooooooons!" To his pleasure, it was working.

One raccoon tentatively moved forward, so Stefan shook a flare at it. He was horrified when smoky, flaming, viscous goo flew from the tube at the creature. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" he said, not caring how ridiculous it was to talk to the thing. He saw he hadn't hit the raccoon, and that it and its partners were closing in on the campsite again. Stefan whirled about with the flares, yelling for all he was worth and climbing up onto the picnic table. Splashes of fire glowed where the flare-goo fell around him, keeping the raccoons at bay.

Stefan felt heat on his back, and the clearing suddenly lit with a flickering yellow light. He turned around and saw the conflagration that used to be his grandfather's tent.

~

Stefan moved slightly. He lay on the picnic table, his arms crossed tight across the chest of the burnt parka-remnants he wore. His muscles ached with tension from shivering.

He opened his eyes, suddenly awake. He had no idea what time it was in this lost part of the night. The clearing was still, and Stefan strained to pick out any sounds. A slight wind picked up, filtered through the pines. He sat up and looked around. Moonlight flickered

through a curtain of leaves on the far side of the clearing. The raccoons had gone off in that direction when they finally decided there was no food to be had in the campsite. The leafy curtain parted with a puff of wind. A raccoon scurried from the opening, stood on its haunches, and gestured for Stefan to follow him.

Stefan blinked.

The raccoon made the gesture again, more insistently. Stefan climbed off the picnic table and followed after the animal. He brushed aside the leaf-curtain, and the brightness of the moonlight here made him temporarily blind. As his eyes adjusted, Stefan saw a man standing there, facing away from him. Around his feet was gathered a circle of raccoons. The man turned around.

“Dad?”

Stefan grinned, and the tears in his eyes turned the moonlight into a marquee around his vision. He wiped at his face. His father motioned to an old, polished log upended in the clearing, and Stefan sat on it, still speechless with joy. His father didn’t speak, either, but that seemed to be a limitation of however he managed to be here. Instead his smile played wide through his beard and cheeks. His eyes, big and dark like Stefan’s, wrinkled with a knowing kind of grace. Stefan had so much to say to him, so many questions based on the assumption that death had given him special insight. Or did Stefan simply expect him to have answers for him just because he was his father, even though he’d only been a few years older when he died than Stefan was now? *What does he know of the world now?* Stefan wondered. *Do you know what I’m thinking?* he thought while looking at the figure, but his father didn’t respond. It was as if he was waiting for Stefan to finish, to acclimatise, so he could get on with what he was here for.

One of the raccoons shuffled toward him holding something. He held it up for Stefan, who took it, seeing that it was an old binocular photo viewer. He looked at the raccoon, who handed him a card with two pieces of film in it. Stefan put that in the viewer. He looked to his father, who pointed up. Stefan clipped the card in place and looked through the device, holding it up so the moon shone on its white celluloid backdrop and illuminated the double slides.

He saw an old cobbled street with tall stone buildings lining its sides. They were topped with angles and arches and spires. He sighed, loving the sight of it. He knew the name of this place, which was spelled out on his bedside table at home. He knew it had some connection with his father, and now with him.

Something jerked his hand, and he found himself squinting into whiteness. The city scene was gone. He looked accusingly at the raccoon beside him, who shrugged in its way and held out its little paws to show they were empty. He looked at the ring of raccoons around his father’s feet, who shrugged in unison, then at his father, who shrugged, not looking playful, but sad about the disappearance.

The raccoon motioned that it wanted the picture-viewer back, so Stefan handed it over, now that it had nothing to show. The raccoon joined the others, blending into their furry mass of grey punctuated with masked faces. From their midst emerged another raccoon, this one holding a sheaf of papers, carrying them with some difficulty to Stefan. He took the papers and looked at the typewritten cover-sheet. *The Empire of Nothing*, it said, *a play by Robert Mackechnie*. Stefan looked up at his father, surprised. “I didn’t know you wrote plays,” said Stefan. His father smiled and shrugged again. He gestured for Stefan to read it.

Stefan read a story of a man and a woman, a couple who met in war-time. Powers clashed over their heads, forces unconcerned with the lovers’ welfare — giving them a kind of anarchic freedom from things that might have kept them apart, but ultimately destroyed the world in which they wanted to live together. Stefan enjoyed it and felt it had something important to say, though he didn’t know exactly what. When he finished, he asked his father, “May I have this?” His father nodded, but the raccoon took the shuffled papers away and brought them back to the circle. Stefan didn’t understand, but all the raccoons seemed to be in

co-operation with his father, their circle somehow keeping him here and giving him physical means. So he let it take the script away.

Two more raccoons stepped forward and moved to either side of the moonlit clearing. One put a tiny paw to its ear and turned from side to side, listening. The second held a paw over its eyes and looked around. They each stepped backwards until they bumped into each other, surprised, and hugged. They became an indistinct ball of grey. Suddenly, from the fur sprang two deer, who bounded out of the clearing, sending Stefan tumbling back off his seat.

He righted himself, amazed. One last raccoon scuttled up to him and handed him a note. Stefan read it: "They don't call it chemistry for nothing". The raccoon grabbed the note and ran back to the others. His father looked at him and tapped his own chest in the spot where just days before Stefan's mother tapped him.

All the creatures stood up on their haunches, then took a bow. Stefan, not sure what else to do, still not sure what he'd seen, clapped for the little raccoon players. His father stood tall in their midst and winked at him.

Then the moon went out.

~

Stefan opened his eyes to the dawning day. In this early light, the colours around him all looked like watercolours with a touch of white added to them. He lay on the picnic table, the burnt parka still wrapped around him, his body aching from huddling against the cold. The previous evening's events came back to him, and he sat up, looking around the campsite for any trace of what he'd seen. He saw nothing. He climbed off the table and explored the woods around the site until he found what might have been the clearing where he saw his father. There was the log he sat on, but what had been a clearing was overgrown, so thick with brush and small trees that he had trouble negotiating the space. He pawed through the bushes, but couldn't find any sign of the binocular picture or his father's script.

He was covered with soot and filth, and reeked of smoke and bacon. He walked to the edge of the island and dipped his hands in the cold lake water. He scrubbed them, smearing the black soot around at first, then managing to clean it off somewhat. His fingernails and the wrinkles of his hands were outlined in black, but he could get rid of that when he got back to the city. He scooped water into his mouth and swished it around, then scooped some more and scrubbed at his face. When the water grew still, he looked at himself, reflected there, his face pale except for the rings of soot around his eyes. *There's my raccoon face*, he thought.

He was finished here. Time to pack up and go home.

~

Thomas Jackrabbit heard a car pull away from his driveway. He opened the front door to find a large box there with an envelope sitting on top. He opened the letter:

I know what I have to do, Grandpa. I have to follow this. Thank you so much.

Thomas smiled. He was impressed that Stefan had managed to pack all his camping gear back into the box. Then he cocked his head, puzzled: black, sooty water was oozing from it.

~

"What are you doing up there?" yelled Delonia. "Come down, we've still got work to do before everyone shows up."

"Just a minute," hollered Stefan in reply. He unfolded the interlaced flaps of a cardboard box. It was the last thing in the attic he hadn't dismantled. Inside, he found a smaller box labelled "Robert". Its lid was taped shut, but Stefan picked at it and found the tape brittle and dry. While driving home from Thomas's, he'd reflected on what he'd seen in the woods,

and remembered the attic. He knew that he'd find his father's things here. That's what the figure meant when he agreed to let Stefan have them.

Inside, Stefan found the stereoscopic picture-viewer, some pictures, and his father's play, along with other memorabilia from his youth in Scotland and the early days of his musical career with Delonia. Stefan picked up a snapshot of his parents singing together in what looked like someone's basement with a party around them, everyone in very dated clothing, Delonia wearing black-rimmed cat-eye glasses. Stefan laughed at the sight of this. His father didn't have his beard yet then, and his smile beamed at Delonia, who smiled just as brightly back at him over the word she sang.

Chemistry, he thought. He remembered the deer. His father and Delonia were changed by finding each other. They were in the process of becoming something, he reasoned, right up to the point his father died. Their transformation was incomplete, and she was left on her own to become something else entirely.

I get it, he thought, *the whole relationship thing*. It was alchemical, a process where two things could become a third that was greater than its constituent elements. He felt sorry for his mother, having to carry on that work by herself, knowing that she didn't have all the necessary ingredients. Her girlfriend Cerise was a science experiment.

"Stefan, we need a hand moving the dining room table," yelled the woman downstairs who no longer seemed quite so familiar, who had knowledge of a whole aspect of life he'd skipped. *What about Ming?* he asked himself. *Nope*, he answered, *that wasn't chemistry. Maybe home economics. Not chemistry.*

"Coming," said Stefan, taking his father's play and the binocular picture set, shoving everything else back in place.

~

The house was brightly-lit and full of charm. It was a great home for parties, with its big rooms — the living room, dining room, and kitchen (where all the drinks were, naturally drawing a crowd), then the upstairs, where the bedrooms provided sanctuary for deep conversations, coat storage, and the odd indiscretion during the course of any given party. The guests were a who's-who, but not from any attempt to assert it themselves. On the contrary: the famous had to go *somewhere*, and each other's company was often more comfortable, as few of them felt the need to verbally genuflect over their various achievements. Of course there was a hierarchy, with the venerable actors, writers, and musicians at the top, being most culturally visible and — for whatever reason — appreciated. Stefan's friends often told him how lucky he was, and he knew it, but not for the reasons they imagined. Fame was a vague cloud, and he'd grown up in it. It had its advantages, and definite disadvantages, too. For him the real luck of it was getting to be around people who were so good at what they did. They imagined things and brought them into being. For that — not their personalities or their elaborate possessions — Stefan regarded them as demi-gods. His mother laughed with the conductor of Cerise's orchestra, who matched Delonia's height and had a swept-back head of white hair. She was one of the demi-gods.

Delonia caught Stefan's eye, and pointed past the conductor to the young host of a television show. Stefan couldn't deny that he found the young man attractive, with his dark hair and eyes, and that confident schoolboy smile. His friends and he had wondered if, perhaps, the host liked men. Allen heard of a party where he'd supposedly disappeared with a man for a while. But like so many rumours it turned out to be wish-projection: the host was here with his fiancée, who stood only ten feet from him, engaged in another conversation. She, of course, was lovely and utterly un-hateable. Stefan gave a strained smile to his mother and nodded. Demi-god or no, philosopher queen to his father's king, his mother still drove him crazy.

The doorbell rang. Stefan answered it, finding a female jazz singer there whose smoky sound he always loved. He was about to tell her how much he'd enjoyed her latest album,

when she gestured behind her. "I think that woman needs help getting in," she said, sliding past him into the party.

Stefan looked down the tall, wide steps and nearly gasped. There in a wheelchair someone had plopped a tiny creature, vaguely feminine, with shiny black hair streaked with grey, glasses like twin television sets each projecting an eye. She held a cigarette up to her mouth, drew in, exhaled a cloud into the night air, and nodded to him. "Think I could get a hand here?" she asked, her voice a basso-helium-frog-croak. Stefan's social graces did him the favour of intercepting a look of shock before it reached his face. He recovered himself, trying so hard to act nonchalant that he knew he was being awkward.

"Um, sure," he said, far too late. He walked down the steps and stood next to her chair. The motorised thing was beyond him; surely she didn't expect him to carry that up the stairs. So he gestured toward her, reaching this way and that, not knowing how to begin lifting her.

"Ever give a dog a bath?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah."

"Like that. Just pick me up like that." She threw her cigarette on the lawn. "Don't worry. Really, you can't mess me up any worse than God did."

An unconscious laugh burst from Stefan's mouth. His face flushed with social horror, until he saw the woman in the wheelchair grinning at him. "It's okay," she said in her odd voice, "you're not comfortable with anything until you can laugh about it. So, there, we got that out of the way. Now pick me up."

"I'm Stefan," he said, curling one arm under her and one behind her back. He lifted her, her tiny legs flopping down from the little square of her body. Her dog analogy was apt: she weighed about the same as the Labrador he once washed, but she was better about being carried.

"I'm Helen," she said, "Helen Jackson. You're Delonia's son, right?"

"Among other things," he said, carrying her through the front door. "Hey, I know that name. You're one of my mother's producers, aren't you?"

"You got it," she said.

"Um, where should I put you?"

"Where are the drinks?" she said with even more of a croak, as if playing for comedic effect.

"Let's go to the kitchen, then," he said. The soft chair in the corner was momentarily empty, and he sat Helen in it like a strange troll doll, careful to make her skirt fall nicely.

"Thank you," she said. "Do you have any bourbon?"

Stefan nodded, giving her a *one second* finger. As he poured the drink, he found himself taken with this woman, her total mastery over her condition — not physically, there was nothing she could do about that, but socially, personally. He brought her the drink, handing it to her with a square napkin. He pulled a chair over from the kitchen table and sat beside her.

"So what do you do?" asked Helen.

"I do voice-over work for a children's show."

"Oh yeah, which one?"

"*The Green Brigade*. Do you know it?" Helen nodded. "I'm 'Bloob Ox'."

"Really? That's amazing. You don't sound anything like that in real life."

"Well," said Stefan with a cocky angle to his head, "that's where the talent comes in, isn't it?"

"Do me," she said.

Oh God. Many people asked him this, and he was generally able to do it to varying degrees of success, depending on how much vocal character the person had in the first place. But with Helen it wouldn't be fair. It was too easy. How could he produce anything close to her voice that wouldn't sound like a mockery?

"Go on. I've heard myself on tape before, I know what I sound like. I dare you. If you get it right, I'll buy you a drink."

Stefan swallowed, then poked his fingers underneath his jaw to loosen his tongue-muscles. "Okay," he said, "here goes. *Hi, my name's Helen Jackson, and I'm here tonight to make you all feel very awkward.*"

"Son of a bitch," she said, "that's very good." Stefan sighed. His risk paid off.

The two of them talked for an hour, gossiping about the people around them. They talked about the state of the world, then came back around to their work in broadcasting.

"I'm going to leave the show," Stefan confided. "I'm going to leave Canada."

Helen's eyebrows rose on her pointed, elfin face. "Delonia never mentioned this."

"She doesn't know."

Her eyebrows rose higher.

"She's everywhere, Helen. There's no place I can go here where I'm not 'Delonia Mackechnie's son'. If she's not getting in my way, her reputation is."

Stefan expected her to counter this, but instead she said, "So where are you going?"

"I'm going to Edinburgh. In Scotland." This was the first he'd said it out loud. The commitment of it made his stomach flutter.

"Oh," said Helen, "are you putting on a show at the Fringe?"

"Sorry?"

"The Fringe Festival. Are you putting on a play there?"

Stefan's heart stalled.

"Yes, I am."

Chapter Five

Helen on Wheels

“There’s a lot here,” said Helen, “but it’s a mess.” She riffled through the manuscript, her eyes flicking back and forth across the pages, magnified so many times by her lenses that each blink surprised Stefan. She looked up at him. “But it’s very good. I haven’t seen anything like this in a long time.”

His spirits lifted. “So what should I do? What’s next?”

Helen lifted her glasses and rubbed her eyes, her fingertips beneath the lenses like pink eggplants. “You’ll need a cast, obviously, and a director. A stage manager, a production manager — those could be the same person. And this script wants a dramaturge, someone to get it into shape. Then you’ll need producers, backing. Getting a show together and paying everyone, particularly if you want to ship it overseas, is more expensive than you might realise, even if you do it on the cheap. That is, unless you get people to do it for free, maybe on some kind of point-sharing system. But then you’re probably looking at student actors. And some of these parts, particularly the older man — you don’t want to do that to this script.”

Stefan slumped back in his chair. He had his own debts to think about, now this. He felt dread coming over him, the feeling that often made him pull the covers over his head instead of facing the day. *This is too hard*, he thought.

Helen sat up in her custom-built, ergonomic executive high-chair. She flicked her long hair from her face and leaned on one of her small arms. “So?” she asked.

“So?” replied Stefan, unsure.

“So when are you going to ask me to help you? Or were you?” she croaked at him, point-blank.

“I couldn’t do that,” he said. “I can’t ask you to take this on. You know I can’t afford you.”

“Stefan, at this point in my life, I don’t need any more money. I’m not rolling in it, but I’m not exactly hard-up, either. This work I do here, I enjoy it, and I enjoy the people I work with, but it’s pretty familiar. Most of it is just entertainment. This play you’ve brought me, it means something, and not just because it has a sentimental attachment for you. I would love to do something I thought had as much meaning in it as this. I also haven’t been involved in theatre in years. It could be fun to try that again.”

“Helen, that’s amazing! I can’t thank you enough. But what about the money?”

“Stefan, look at me. I’m a handicapped First Nations woman who can speak French. I’m a government grant on wheels. I also happen to be a very good producer. I can raise us some money. But you’ll also have to hustle, too. I can’t do everything.”

“Oh, for sure,” he said, with no idea how he’d raise his portion.

“So,” she said, “is it a deal?”

“Definitely. Deal.”

“Alright, shake,” she said, offering him one of her little clover-like hands, “but not too hard.”

“You amaze me,” said Stefan.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling, then going deadpan. “If you patronise me again, this whole thing is off.”

~

Stefan walked through the large concrete park next to the broadcasting centre where he’d just left Helen in her office. Dried leaves scraped across the ground in the chill wind. Skyscrapers towered all around him, monoliths of glass in turquoise, copper, and black. Across the park, lights blinked around the marquees of theatres that hosted touring mega-musicals. Stefan tried to imagine what the budget for those shows might be, but didn’t know where to begin.

Equally unfathomable was the amount they pulled in each night with their enormous ticket prices.

He faced into the wind, digging his hands into his pockets, making a mental note to find his gloves when he got home. He tried thinking about his own show, tried breaking the task down, but his mind had a habit of not sticking with difficult tasks, chasing every stray thought like a little dog after feigned throws of a non-existent ball. Before he knew it, his mind fixated on the need for a coffee — that drink his mother referred to as “office drugs”. Stefan turned back toward the broadcasting building, a giant concrete block outlined with red metal piping. On the ground floor was a coffee shop (“An institutionalised dealer,” Delonia said in his mind).

The shop was a cafeteria decorated like a bistro. Stefan poured himself a medium cup of coffee from an urn, then followed the roller coaster tray rails to the till, where he paid, then took a seat at one of the small tables. He preferred his coffee with sugar, but he also preferred not to hear Delonia’s reminder that the brown sugar they offered was just white sugar with molasses added, and white sugar was “powdered cancer”. The chemical alternatives to sugar weren’t an option for him either, having heard his mother unconsciously mutter “excitotoxins” every time she saw someone dump the contents of one of the little paper sachets into a cup. Nothing in her world was simple. On their search for her birthday cake, Stefan had commented to Allen that it would be easier to find the Arc of the Covenant than to find a ‘cake’ that matched her nutritional demands. Allen suggested that the Arc might make a nice gift, but Stefan insisted that it was a bit Christian for her tastes. Allen suggested that she could still use it for storing linen, as long as she vacuumed it out with her eyes closed first. Would that then, Stefan asked, make their vacuum cleaner the Electrolux of the Covenant?

Stefan realised he would miss his friends when he left. *Still*, he thought, *it’s always easier to be the leave-er than the leave-ee.*

“You’re Delonia Mackechnie’s son, aren’t you?” said a voice, bringing Stefan back to the cafeteria.

“Yeah, it’s Stefan, hi.” In this building the tone of such exchanges was different, easier for him to take: less take-home autograph requests, more expressions of professional admiration for his mother.

“My name’s Roger. I’m the floor manager for *Super Fantastic Window*. Do you know the show?”

Stefan stifled a laugh. “Uh, yeah. Every time I see that couch on your show I get a happy feeling.”

“‘The Mirror’ died on Thursday,” said Roger.

“What? Not — what was his name? Theo, wasn’t it? Oh, I’m really sorry.”

“Yeah. Bad circumstances, too. Luckily we’re managing to keep it out of the papers. If he lived it would’ve been a scandal, but since he’s dead it wouldn’t play for very long, so we managed to convince everyone to skip it.”

“Wow, that’s too bad. I met his wife a few times. She’s really nice.”

“She was there, too. And some other couples, along with some strippers, hustlers, animal handlers, you name it. Big private party in a hotel pool, disco lights hanging overhead — you can do the math.”

“Oh God,” said Stefan.

“Yeah. Big investigation, everyone from the vice squad to the SPCA. We’ve put off shooting for a few days, but if we can’t start again right away, the show might fold.”

Something in Roger’s voice was less than matter-of-fact, Stefan realised. “You’re telling me all this for a reason, aren’t you?”

“Well, I’ve heard about you from the people on your show. They say you’re really talented.”

“And you want me to voice-over ‘The Mirror’?”

“Well,” said Roger, “you’d also have to do the arms, too. You know, how they wiggle on either side of the mirror-frame with those big gloves on? Theo loved that part.”

“Does it pay scale?”

“God no,” said Roger, “the guy did the show for fifteen years. It’s three times that.” Stefan grinned. “For three times scale, Roger, I’ll wiggle anything you want.”

~

“The stimeless story of a woman’s passion,” said Stefan in an earnest *basso profundo*.

“Perfect,” piped a voice electronically into the tiny sound booth. Behind the word Stefan heard the echo of another voice.

“No, it wasn’t,” said Stefan, “I said ‘stimeless’.”

“Oh,” replied the electronic voice with the echo. “All right then, let’s do it again.”

Stefan enjoyed this, doing movie trailer dubs. The film distributor couldn’t afford the ‘real’ voice that everyone knew from the cinema, but Stefan could provide them with a version just different enough to have that familiar feel, yet not invite any potential legal problems. The day’s recording would pay well, but he’d also receive residuals every time the trailer ran. He also liked getting an early peek at the movies being produced locally, though sometimes he found it difficult to speak about them with the seriousness the films’ producers requested.

“Alright,” said Stefan, then took a deep breath. “The timeless story of a woman’s passion...”

~

Stefan looked over the pages of the grant application. “Wow,” he said, “this is pretty thorough.”

“You have to be,” said Helen. “This is decision by committee we’re talking about. Lots of applications are eliminated off the bat because they goof up on the basic requirements. It saves the committee looking at everything in depth. I know that some of what I’ve written there doesn’t sound much like your play—”

“My dad’s play,” interjected Stefan.

“It’s *your* play now,” countered Helen. “You have to take ownership of it. We won’t ever get it on its feet if we’re being precious with it.” She adjusted in her chair with a little hop. “So that’s what I’m submitting. We’ve missed this year’s deadline, of course.”

Stefan’s face fell.

“Oh, don’t look so gloomy. Let me make a call.” She put on a headset with a microphone and a little dial-pad attached, flipped through a wheel of cards on her desk, then dialled a number with a deft series of finger-pokes. “Hi, yes, this is Helen, could you put me through? Thanks.” She smiled at Stefan and gave him a little thumbs-up. “Hi there. I was just wondering how you were getting along with my application. What do you mean? Oh, don’t tell me you didn’t get it! Dammit! Okay, I tell you what, I’m going to courier it over to you right now. Yeah, perfect. Thanks. Yep. Great. Okay, so I’ll hear from you soon? Perfect!” She poked her dial-pad and took off the headset, grinning. “That’s how it’s done, baby.”

“So what do you think our chances are?” asked Stefan.

“Very good. And not because of that little manoeuvre there, and not just because of that application. I wouldn’t push it through like that if I didn’t believe in that play.”

“I really appreciate this, Helen.”

“I appreciate the opportunity, Stefan. Art can change the world, you know. Well, so can business. But art can save it.”

Stefan had never considered this. It hadn’t come up. “So how long until we find out?” he asked, after deciding that he had nothing to add to her declaration.

“At least a couple of months.” She cocked her head. “You’re making that face again, Stefan. This is the process. It takes that long. We need this time. We have a lot of work to do.”

~

Stefan wondered why he shouldn't just buy a ticket and leave. Money was coming in, and his debts were shrinking quickly. With a set purpose before him, he found it easy to avoid spending and to accumulate money quickly. This play, though, it would take everything he had and then some, and from what Helen told him, he knew he shouldn't expect to make a cent from the production.

He walked along Yonge Street, past discount stores, sex boutiques, and electronics shops, all lit with flashing neon words and flickering bulbs. Every window offered objects he could have, but he was pleased to find he didn't want. People bustled in and out of the shops and squeezed past him on the sidewalk. Pixelboards overhead flashed down with giant news-anchor heads, shiny cars, and television celebrities.

The next shop he passed was a travel bureau. Inside the window was a white plastic board listing destinations, with prices magic-markered in next to them. Edinburgh wasn't listed. Glasgow was the closest destination mentioned. He could get there just by putting the ticket on his credit card.

Stefan took out his wallet and opened it. His father's face looked from his driver's licence at him with one eyebrow raised. Stefan slammed the wallet shut.

Right, he thought, I should stick with the plan.

~

Stefan watched as the bodies flapped together like pink sea creatures thrown from a net. He turned his head, studying them, listening closely, trying to filter out their voices from that extra voice he always heard. He really wanted to listen to the other voice, but that was not what he was here to do.

"What are they saying to each other?" Stefan asked. "Do you have a transcript, something translated that I can work from?"

"Look," said the man who'd been assigned to this task, who Stefan suspected was not a real recording engineer, "it's an adult movie. What sounds do you make when you bang a girl?"

"Oh, I uh, I don't—" stammered Stefan, then finally concluded with a shrug.

"Right, okay, I've dealt with your kind before, those 'What's my motivation?' types. You know what your motivation is? Getting paid. You want to know the dialogue?" he asked, scribbling on a piece of paper. "Here. Here you go. Now we're going to take this in one." He returned to his controls. "Go!"

Stefan followed the movements of the man onscreen as best he could, moaning. When the man started speaking, Stefan read from the paper with all the conviction he could muster. "Yeah. You like that, don't you bitch?"

Ah feel like a fish supper, said the extra voice he heard underneath the recorded sounds, uncharacteristically clear. Stefan bit his hand to keep from laughing, moaning instead. The voice and he were in on a joke, and something about that felt sexy. Stefan found himself forgetting the sound man and getting wrapped up in the work.

~

Helen crossed out a line of the script and Stefan winced. She picked up her cup of tea and sat back on the low couch in her living room. The space was filled with carvings and paintings of dramatic aboriginal Canadian design. They were surrounded by vivid spirits with exaggerated expressions and grand stories behind them. Stefan looked at one of the sculptures, marvelling that this whole section of the Canadian world that had only existed for him before in a shadow way had now come alive for him. The culture's back had been broken long ago, and some

people like his grandfather insisted that assumptions of a spirituality were antiquated and condescending, but Stefan felt there was something to it. Just the idea, the romance of it, made it real. Still, though, it was too thin in his blood for him to claim it as his own. He knew it wasn't. His spirit was elsewhere, and he'd had that feeling long before his father came back into his life to tell him.

"Stefan?" said Helen. "Focus."

"Right, where were we?"

"This line. It doesn't work. What do you feel your father was trying to say?"

"Well, here she's talking about her father's company."

"Oh," said Helen, "oh, I hadn't seen that. Good. So how should we put that?"

Stefan picked up a pencil and leaned in next to Helen, scribbling words beside her notation on the photocopied script. He wondered about being so close to her, but knew she would make no mistake about him; surely Delonia found some opportunity during their work together to divulge her son's exotic sexual otherness (though the revelation got much more of a reaction when he was in grade school; in recent years the effect had diminished greatly).

Helen was so comfortable to be around. When they were out in public together, he saw how people reacted to her, just as he had when he first saw her, and felt lucky to be past the bubble of her strangeness, in close to the centre of who she really was. But being with her — her endless challenges to any half-reasoned, sloppy arguments from him and her complete commitment to the things she stood for — honed his thinking to a point where he could see through even this new-found comfort to a sort of smugness, a self-righteous pride in their friendship: at its core was still her difference; he felt special for getting beyond it, for being the chosen company of such an oddity. *Question everything*, she told him. He wondered if her circumstances made her this clever, or if she would have been like this anyway. Maybe she and her circumstances were indistinguishable. It occurred to Stefan that her condition wasn't something put upon her, something that should be fixed. It was as quintessentially her as the laugh — like an emptying balloon — that he loved to coax from her.

"What about this line?" Helen asked him. "This section is all a bit foggy. What does it mean?"

"I have no idea," answered Stefan.

"Good," said Helen. "It's good to say that. Let me know if you get any indication."

Helen often made oblique references to his recent experiences of his father, speaking of them in a matter-of-fact way that made him feel better. "We'll skip it for now and come back to it."

Stefan nodded. Then looked at the marked-up script: the 'finished' pile consisted of a few sheets of paper. The 'yet-to-do' pile was very big.

~

"These gloves kinda smell," said Stefan, putting the bulbous fingers near his nose.

"Yeah, Theo was a bit superstitious about them," said the floor manager.

"Washing them was bad luck?"

"Something like that."

"Yeah, well," said Stefan, "you can tell Wardrobe that I'm not superstitious." He walked behind the black velvet drape and pushed the oversized hands through openings on either side. "Hey, cool," said Stefan, leaning his face into the back of the mirror, "I can see through this. I never knew the guy could see through it."

"Yeah, it's a sheet of Mylar. We spray it down so it doesn't reflect the cameras."

"Hey there, kids," said Stefan, waving his hands around the thick gold mirror frame, which matched the look of the green-screen window on the opposite side of the puffy couch. He pressed his nose to the 'glass' and called to the floor manager. "Hey, Roger, I can see what you're doing over there with the wardrobe lady." He made lewd gestures with the oversized hands.

“Har har,” called Roger over his shoulder. He could see the long shape of Stefan’s nose against the mirror. “Just be careful there,” he said, turning back to the costume mistress. He heard a sound and turned back to Stefan.

Stefan’s head hung through the torn sheet of plastic. His eyebrows were making for his hairline. “Um,” he said, “sorry?”

~

Stefan stood outside the travel bureau, smiling. He held a ticket in his gloved hand. He opened the long cardboard envelope and looked at the sheets with their red carbon backing. *August third*. He stuffed the ticket into his jacket’s inside pocket, then took out his wallet. His narrow face smiled awkwardly from his driver’s licence, the long dimples on either side of his smile and his big open eyes making him look a bit simple. He didn’t like the picture, but it was the one he was accustomed to, the one that was supposed to be there.

Well Dad, he thought, I’ll take this as a good sign.

This was his secret Christmas present to himself. He’d yet to tell anyone other than Helen that he was leaving. He felt guilty about all the people he’d be leaving behind, so he kept quiet. He supposed his friends would understand — they’d all talked about leaving sometime or another, and were hardly going to stay there for each other. His mother would take it personally. *And why shouldn’t she?* he thought. It seemed cruel, put like that.

He turned and walked down the blinking canyon of Yonge Street toward the mall, on a mission.

~

Xmas was always a big affair in Delonia’s house. She made a point of calling it “Xmas” whenever she mentioned it, and only the uninitiated would refer to the occasion by its religious name. Things were cooking in the oven, on the stove, in the toaster oven, and thawing on counters. Decorations hung everywhere, and lights trailed around ceilings, up the stairs, and around every window. People would soon arrive for a party lasting well into the next day. But it was still early. Delonia wafted about in her dressing-robe, a giant wrapped in a drape. Cerise plodded heavily downstairs holding her head, not yet Delonia’s equal when it came to holiday excess. Stefan joined them in the living room — where Delonia said they must meet at this time — holding a large gift-wrapped bundle.

“What’s this?” asked Delonia.

“It’s for you, Mom,” said Stefan, smiling, “and for you, Other Mom.” Cerise was surprised, her open mouth turned up in a smile.

“Go on,” said Stefan. The two women tore the paper from the gift, exposing a very large and very thick duvet. He saw his mother’s eyes reflexively flash to the label, worried.

“Yes, it’s made with real feathers,” said Stefan, “but they were taken from the hatchery of a wildlife reserve. Nobody died.”

Delonia smiled at his knowledge of her, and held her arms open. Stefan reached across to hug her. “Merry Xmas,” he said. She replied in kind. Then he turned to Cerise and gave her a warm, if careful, hug. “Merry Xmas,” he said, kissing her on the cheek. She smelled of cigarette smoke. He wondered how Delonia handled that.

~

Stefan had seen Rick’s pictures already, the ones his girlfriend sent from Malaysia, but Rick was happy and drunk, so Stefan feigned ignorance and let Rick talk him through them again. Jennifer was pretty, and she looked very happy there, sun-browned and set against a paradise backdrop. She’d sent Rick pictures. Despite all their worries to the contrary, this meant he was still in, that he wasn’t deluding himself about their still being an item. Something about him

was more relaxed, too. Stefan never considered that Rick had doubts, too. But tonight everything was fine.

Rick straightened the pictures and slid them carefully back into the envelope they'd arrived in, with his name printed on it in Jennifer's handwriting. It was time for him to go back up for the next set on the makeshift stage at Allen's house. Few of the friends Allen had invited over for New Year's seemed to be enjoying Rick's band — it was a bit heavy for them — but there was a lighter tone than usual in Rick's delivery.

Allen's partner had family (or friends, or business, or something) in New York, and couldn't be at the party. No one was surprised, since he didn't like any of Allen's friends and made no effort to hide it. Allen had just secured a large deal at work, and threw even more money into this year's party than usual, and was having a fine time playing host on his own.

Paulo plopped himself down on the couch next to Stefan, grinning, handing Stefan a second cup of the strongly-spiked punch. Paulo clearly couldn't wait for midnight, because this year he had someone. His Adam was across the room, talking to some other journalist person, both of them excavating the quarry of spinach-dip rye bread wheels.

Stefan wondered what chemistry was at work in his friends' relationships. He didn't feel jealous for a change, but happy for them, curious, watching and wondering who these exchanges would turn them into. And he had something this New Year's, too: a secret. He sipped his punch, smiling at Paulo, though his throat tightened at the thought that this was his last New Year's with these friends.

Someone started the countdown to midnight, and everyone joined in. Stefan wondered how long it would take to count to August.

Chapter Six

Something to Show

The subway car moved through the dark guts of the city, a length of stainless steel cud delivering human nutrients to its vitals — the businesses and shops. The lights flickered and the car shuddered to a halt. The passengers groaned. The momentary complaint unified the riders, then they returned to ignoring each other. Their eyes drifted to the advertisements above the facing passengers, to their shoes, to their books, newspapers, and magazines. The light was dim here in the tunnel, so any kind of sight-related activity was a pretence, but the passengers shared a tacit agreement to leave each other alone in their bubbles of privacy. That imaginary solitude was the only concession available to those who had to get to work this way.

Stefan looked at his hands, examined his fingernails, coughed, then looked up at an ad for basketball shoes. Annoyed at the commercial invasion of his thoughts, he studied the subway car's door, self-consciously adopting an expression that said, *I'm just looking to see what's happening*. He checked his watch with the same forced deliberation. A voice came over the loudspeaker, but he had no idea what it said. This was not because of the second voice he always heard, but the quality of the sound: none of the other riders had any idea what the mumbled yet blaring announcement said, either. *God love the Toronto Transit Commission*, thought Stefan. For some reason, every transit worker he encountered seemed angry about something. He wondered what that was.

A little girl sat across from him, playing with a plastic horse in the seat beside her mother, who read one of the daily tabloids. The girl caught Stefan looking at her. She smiled. A feeling filled Stefan's chest, welling up to a geyser of a grin. The girl hadn't learned the grown-up subway game yet. He hoped she never would.

He wondered where the mother and daughter were headed this late at night. He looked left and right. The subway was unusually busy given the hour. He poked fingers at his throat, trying to relieve the tightness there. This had been a long day, with two ads to voice over, a movie trailer, and an adult film — in French. When he was young, Delonia and he sometimes spoke French to each other, their secret code when they were up to something and didn't want his father to know about it. But that was a long time ago, and he found himself that day trying to make the proper names of body parts sound deliberate and sexy, since he didn't know any of the street words for them. Luckily, he didn't need to construct full sentences after the cursory set-up of the movie's premise (patient meets nurse, nurse undresses patient to bathe him, patient and nurse quickly decide to have sex, doctor checks up on patient, also has sex with nurse, three other nurses join them, and so on). Once the sex began, the filmmakers didn't care if the sound matched the on-screen figures' mouth movements, so Stefan developed a stock set of moans and phrases, and could now do his part while drinking coffee or reading the paper.

These other jobs all took place after a full day recording *Green Brigade*. His producer Jean and he had reached a détente that allowed Stefan creative expression in his voice-work as long as he kept quiet about the show's writing and political intent. He didn't feel bothered by this. He didn't feel much of anything. It was February.

His life was being bent out of shape by Cerise's ability to drive: Delonia reneged on her gift and Stefan had to take the subway or a streetcar to his various jobs. Just as well, he decided, he was saving a lot of money this way. He could barely remember what he was saving his money for, though. All he knew was that he was making lots of it.

He took off his gloves; the subway car's vents blew great quantities of hot air into the small space. The little girl tugged at her mother's sleeve. "Mom," she said. Her mother patted the girl's leg and continued reading. "Mo-om," she pleaded with increasing intensity. Her mother told her to sit still. She responded by throwing up in her mother's lap. The sharp blue cheese smell soon filled the car. People politely made gestures to cover their noses, then grew less polite. Eyes met, and people nodded to say, *Yeah, that's awful*. A few people broke into laughter. "I hate the TTC!" someone finally yelled. Usually outbursts were reserved for the

crazy and were studiously ignored. This one, though, got a round of applause and a few “Amen”.

In her own disgusting way, Stefan thought, the girl had broken the subway spell.

~

Stefan emerged from the tiled cavern of the subway into an afternoon overhung with low grey clouds, as if someone had stapled old bedding to the sky. He walked the four blocks to his agent’s office, passing victory homes with tiny square front yards penned in with low chain link fences. As he got closer to the office, the buildings changed to commercial properties, but most of these were derelict. He passed an old family hardware store with faded 1970s signage here, then a ‘jobbers’ with a sign offering daily work to secretaries, cleaners, and factory workers, then reached his agent’s office, with its smoky-tinted windows. He opened the stiff glass door and entered an interior of chocolate-coloured furniture, brass clocks and lamps, two old electric typewriters, and filing cabinets overflowing with papers.

Stefan had never been here until recently, when he’d taken on all his extra jobs. The *Green Brigade* work took care of itself, but now he needed his agent’s help to keep all his appointments from conflicting and to collect the cheques from various production companies.

“Hello, Stefan,” said the receptionist, who also happened to be the agent’s wife. The agency was modest by Toronto standards, but it was all he’d ever needed.

“Hiya, Hester. I’m supposed to see David.”

“Yep, he’s expecting you. Go right in.”

Stefan nodded and opened the door behind her desk. David sat there, looking out the window at a small backyard shared with a neighbouring house. A bookshelf and filing cabinet stood against one wall of his office. Every other surface was covered with black-and-white headshots. Most of these photographs were old. Stefan wondered about the pictures of children with precocious smiles. What had become of them? He recognised one of them from a television program about a family with an adopted alien son. Child stars had a short shelf-life, particularly in Canada. Stefan once saw the alien boy at a party looking weathered and distinctly stoned.

“Stefan, sit down,” said David, not rising, but sitting back in his creaking office chair, his stomach bulging like a hill covered with a starched white sheet.

“Hi, David,” said Stefan, sitting in one of the two chairs in front of the desk.

“I gotta say, son, I don’t know what’s got into you lately, but I like it.” He’d lowered his large glasses to look at a spreadsheet of some kind, then raised them again to look at Stefan. “You’re bringing in more residuals than all my other clients combined, did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t know that. I’m happy to be useful.”

“You’re being more than useful.”

“Well, like I said, I’m glad I’m helping out. You’ve always been good to me, even when I wasn’t doing much.” He shifted in his seat. “I just came by to pick up my cheques and find out where I’m supposed to go next week.”

“Right. Okay, we’ll get all that straightened out, and then I have a proposition for you.”

“Oh. O-kay,” said Stefan, unsure.

“Here’s your usual cheques for *The Green Show*—” (He rarely got the projects’ titles right.) “Here’s from the movie house. These are from that documentary about the bears—” *Otters*, thought Stefan. “And, um, here’s the *other* ones.” These were in a sealed envelope. David pushed it across to Stefan as if it were something old and dead. *Ah, the porn.*

“Now,” said David, lacing his hands together and leaning forward as Stefan put the various papers into his jacket pocket. David pushed his glasses up his squashed tomato of a nose. “You seem to be on an ambitious streak lately. I know for the past several years you’ve told me you only wanted to do *The Green Show*, and I respected that. But since you’ve been taking on all these other jobs lately, I thought you might be interested in something bigger.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I really don’t think I could do any more than I’m doing now.”

“I didn’t say ‘more’, Stefan, I said ‘*bigger*.’” David cleared his throat. “I put your demo in for a new Saturday morning cartoon. This is a sure thing, this show. It’s one of those computer cartoons, a tie-in with a product that’s been a top-seller for two years now. You’re up for the voice of a new lead character, and you’ve got a really good shot at it. He’s — I dunno, some kind of a robot or something. It’s called—” he checked a piece of paper in Stefan’s file “—*Machine Marines*. What do you think?”

“When would I have time to do this?”

“Stefan, you’re not hearing me. This job would *pay*, and pay *good*. You wouldn’t have to do anything else.”

“Oh.” Stefan looked out the window at the backyard. Snow was starting to fall from the newsprint sky, covering the hydro wires, the beige lawn, and the rusted swing-set. “Well.”

“Of course, you’d need to move to LA.”

“Oh.” Stefan’s eyebrows took flight.

David smiled. “Great, isn’t it?”

“Uh, yeah. That is great. Thanks for setting that up, David. I don’t know, though. I had some other plans. There was this project—” He trailed off, looking at the lifeless faces on the wall.

“Oh, yeah, sorry about that — I’ve got a whole bunch of messages for you here from a woman named Helen.” He dug through a drawer and pulled out a stack of little yellow memo sheets. “She really wants to talk to you.” He read the notes. “Sets, casting, dates, venues, and something about funding. She was getting pretty pushy with Hester, but we know you don’t take phone calls.”

“Can’t.”

“Right,” said David, with no idea what Stefan meant. “Anyway, you should get in touch with her.”

“Yeah, I will. Look, David, I should get going. I’ve got to go meet some friends. Do you mind if I think about that offer for a few days?”

“Sure, that’s fine,” said David in a tone suggesting it was not fine. “Whatever you want.”

“Thanks. I appreciate all you’re doing for me.” He shook his agent’s hand and said goodbye to Hester on the way out. Large flakes of snow hit his face as he walked. Some melted in his hair and ran down his neck. He stopped walking: he forgot where he was supposed to go next.

~

Stefan closed his eyes on the dance floor and covered his ears. Coloured lights penetrated his eyelids and the beat pounded through his hands. He stood there, deliriously happy. His friends surrounded him, bumping into him from time to time as they danced.

He hadn’t seen them in weeks, he was so busy or so tired. He knew he couldn’t drink this much every night, and lots of times his gang’s attempts at big nights out turned into duds. Still, he wondered if there was some way to stay in this moment forever.

Somebody stumbled into him, then clapped him on the shoulder. He opened his eyes, and found his friends laughing, dancing in a circle around him.

~

Stefan ran a hand through his drooping hair and smacked his lips. His mouth tasted horrible. Allen offered him breakfast, but he declined, anxious to get home, clean himself properly, and change his clothes. He’d decided the night before that he was in no shape to walk home, and he’d been having such a good time that he accepted Allen’s offer of his fold-out couch.

Stefan stopped at a little bakery. Its name scrawled in black script across its teal-tiled exterior, Harbord Bakery. His favourite baked sweets from the shop were Jewish, but many of the staff inside looked Mediterranean. Toronto's neighbourhoods were becoming hybrids: Italian/Korean, Greek/East Indian, Chinese/Nouveau Hippie. Perhaps, he thought, something was being lost. But then again, this opened up the communities like never before, and introduced people his age to foods and cultural activities his parents' generation would never have considered sampling. Well, he reconsidered, perhaps not his mother, the most culturally sensitive person on earth.

He bought some coffee cake and ate it as he walked the rest of the way home, tearing off sticky chunks, licking his fingers after each one he put in his mouth. Sunday was living up to its name, and it was early enough that most of the snow was unblemished, except for that along the road, which looked like cola slush drink from a convenience store. He thought he might like one of those, but they were impossible to find in the winter. He crumpled the paper bag from the bakery, having finished his cake, and sneaked it into a garbage can in the laneway of a small brick house. He ran along the sidewalk then slid a long distance — the sun's warmth made the snow heavy and wet, ideal for sliding. He reached up to jostle a tree-branch, then ducked away as heavy clumps of snow fell behind him.

This was good enough, all this. He thought about David's offer, but put it out of his mind. *Not today*. Plans seemed too hard. He knew there was something else he was supposed to be working on, but it eluded him.

The smell of coffee greeted him as he opened the front door. Cerise's presence wasn't an altogether bad thing. It had cost him the car, but there were other concessions around the house that made life easier.

"Hi, Cerise," said Stefan, filling a cup from the coffee maker urn. The beans were sure to have been picked by a well-paid group of revolutionary farmers, he figured, but he didn't care about that as long as it tasted good. His mother tried for years to foist chicory on him, whose flavour he could only describe as "not coffee".

"Hi, Stef," said Cerise, looking up from a thick weekend paper (Delonia's recycling efforts were strained to their limits by Cerise's international newspaper fetish.) "Oh," she said, "you might want to watch out for your mo—"

"Hello, Stefan," said Delonia, entering the kitchen. "Could I speak with you in the study?"

This is not good, he thought. That invitation had always been an ominous one. Surely he was too old to get in trouble. Confused, he followed her through to the back room and sat in a deep, padded wingback chair next to a wall lined with books. The look of the room suggested they might be legal texts, but they were Delonia's music and human potential collection, ranging from joyful sex to the history of folk music to finding one's spirit pet.

Delonia sat on the corner of the desk, looming above him, her broad mouth pursed. She started to speak, but stopped herself. She smiled at him with her large teeth, giving him her strange disappointed smile, which he'd seen only a few times. She breathed deeply, then spoke. "I spoke with Doug Hendry on Friday," she said. Stefan's face was a blank. "From the Canada Council."

Stefan insides deflated. He wrapped his hands together. They were cold.

"He told me he'd seen your name on an application, and made the connection that you were my son. The project had been approved already, and he wanted to congratulate me. He said he didn't know my son was a First Nations playwright. I told him that I didn't, either."

"Mom, I didn't actually—"

"I know, Helen did. I've already spoken to her about it, after I set Doug straight. I'm disappointed in her, so disappointed, after all our years of working together. I can't even express how shocked and appalled I am at you. I don't know which one of you is more to blame for this scheme, but it's over now. I told Doug what I knew, and they cancelled your funding."

Stefan's hands were freezing now, but his face burned with embarrassment and anger. There was no way out of Delonia's accusations. Even though he hadn't done the paperwork, he had a good idea how Helen was going to doctor it. He felt angry at her himself, for claiming he was the playwright. His father wrote it. It was his father's play.

Dad.

He'd forgotten about the play, but worse, he'd forgotten about his father.

"I'm sorry," said Stefan, standing. "This got out of hand, and we did things the wrong way."

"You're telling me! What's so important that you had to lie like this? Why didn't you come to me? What's going on here?"

"Well, nothing now," he said, "thanks very much."

"Stefan, you know I would have helped you. I've already told Helen that I'd fund this project, whatever it is. She said she had to talk to you about it, but you'd probably say no."

"Damned right I'd say no!"

"I don't understand. I'm trying to help you."

"You have a very strange notion of help, Mom."

"I have high personal standards, and I'd hoped you had them, too. If it got out that you'd lied to get a Canada Council grant application, how would that make us look? People have different standards for you when you're a public figure, and everything you do has to be consistent and virtuous."

"You are so full of it," spat Stefan. "Your *career* is based on a lie. You're supposed to be this wholesome native figure, but you haven't set foot on a reservation in decades — your Métis blood is so diluted it's clear — and you're shackled up with a dyke, but you've never had her on one of your family hours. So don't give me that about virtue. Besides, you're the famous one, not me."

He left the room, fuming at her, yet nauseated with humiliation that his mother had righteously ruined his plans and made a fool of him. More than ever, he wanted to get out of the range of her influence.

I can still run away, he thought. All was not lost. He had the play, a polished final version of it. How he and Helen could face each other again, he wasn't sure. But he had the play. *Why did we even apply for a grant?* he wondered. *Because we needed the money.* But in these sleepwalking months, he'd bankrolled a lot of cash, and by the time they opened the show he'd have more than enough.

Stefan pulled down the attic stairs and climbed up. He tugged on a chain, lighting a single bulb. His father wasn't here. He'd left Stefan when Stefan forgot about him. The original copy of the play was still up here, though, sitting in a stationery box on a milking stool. He picked the box up, sat, down, and opened it. *Empire of Nothing*, said the cover page. *A play by Robert Mackechnie.*

Stefan started to read.

~

"Hello," said Stefan to the woman sitting at a desk in the vestibule of the church. Her hair was trimmed to a faint fuzz, her clothes a shiny black material, with a high, pearlescent white collar rising almost to her chin.

"Hello," she said, beaming euphorically at him. Her name-tag read "Hello, my name is Jana."

"I'm looking for Brother James."

"Oh, he's conducting a small service right now. Is there anything I can help you with?"

He didn't want to make dangerous assumptions about the Matholics' gender roles — perhaps she was James's superior. Besides, he figured she could do any of what James did on

his last visit. “Yeah, why not?” he said. “I came in here a while back, and I sent a letter to my father.”

The woman cocked her head and smiled. “And how did that go for you?” she asked in a flat tone. *Perhaps spending too much time with the dead makes you crazy*, Stefan thought. His limited experience seemed to reinforce the idea. Or maybe it was the math they used in their rituals, he considered. Math had that effect on him, too. “Were you satisfied with the response?” she chirped.

“I don’t know if ‘satisfied’ is the word,” he replied, “but it certainly had an impact.” He pulled the play from his satchel along with a covering letter to his father. “I wanted to send him this.” He dropped the thick stack of papers on the table.

“Oh,” she said. He imagined cartoon dollar signs flashing in her eyes, but her expression hadn’t changed. He figured they probably didn’t get many repeat customers, and he aimed to haggle over the price of sending so many papers. “It’s just that there’s a service on,” she said, squinting.

“It’s really important,” he said.

“It always is,” she replied, annoyed traces of her previous, real-world personality leaking into her tone. “Never quite so important when they’re alive, though, is it?” she asked under her breath as she rooted through a box for a name-tag and a marker.

Stefan took the name-tag. “I’m sorry? He died when I was nine years old.”

Jana recomposed herself, standing. “Ah. Oh. My apologies.” Stefan guessed from her flub that she was a junior here, not able yet to keep the beatific demeanour from slipping.

She opened the big inner doors to the chapel. Stefan took a sticker from a banana in his pocket and stuck it to the name-tag so it read “Hello, my name is *Reduced for Quick Sale*”. He followed Jana into the chapel. In a far corner, he saw James standing in front of a small group of people who sat in pews. Around the room hung sparkly banners full of symbols Stefan vaguely remembered from school. How trigonometry might be a doorway to the infinite was beyond him.

Jana led him to an alcove at the back of the chapel. James looked up from his small congregation, annoyed at the disturbance. He was about to return his attention to his listeners when he recognised Stefan. He pulled his robes up slightly and walked quickly toward them. Jana had already moved into the alcove, and Stefan, feeling unnerved, rushed after her.

Jana opened a wooden frame with tiny wires strung across its surface and placed Stefan’s covering letter to his father into one side, then sprinkled it with blue and gold flecked powder. Into the other side she placed a piece of the odd paper he’d written on the last time he was here, then closed the frame and put it into a device on top of a small pillar, like the one James had used.

“You’re back,” said James, reaching them.

“Yes,” said Stefan, turning back to Jana to see the letter go.

“Jana, wait a moment before you do that,” said James, but her face was illuminated by the bright flash from the device. Stefan felt the heat as James crossed to the podium, but it was too late. The copy-sheet of the letter was gone. James dropped the frame as he pulled it out, burning his hands. He scrambled on the floor for the original letter as it drifted out and curled. Stefan, not sure why, grabbed his play from Jana and tried to get to his letter before James could reach it.

James looked up from the floor. “What was in that letter you sent? The first one?”

“Nothing,” said Stefan, “it was just a letter to my father. So’s that. Give it back!”

Someone moved to Stefan’s right, and he turned to see who it was. No one was there. Stefan turned back to James, who had his letter.

“What’s in those pages?” demanded the cleric.

“Nothing!” said Stefan, backing away toward the door.

“I need to know what you’ve been sending across,” insisted James, closing in. Stefan turned and burst through the doors, running through the vestibule. Again, he saw something at the edge of his vision, but he kept moving, pushing through the outer doors. On the stairs,

someone shoved him and he fell, rolling, clutching the pages of the play. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, looking up toward the door to see a figure in a black woollen cloak, wearing a hat with a large flat circle of a brim. James opened the door behind the figure. "Come inside," he said to the man, "you shouldn't be out here." He held the door open further, and the figure walked inside. James pulled it shut behind them.

Stefan sat in the snow, pulling together the loose pages of the play. *They have my letter*, he thought. He considered his options and decided to let them keep it. He wasn't going back in.

His forehead throbbed. He put a hand to it, which came back dark and wet with what looked like chocolate sauce under the sodium lights outside the church. He stood and headed for the nearest hospital, happy that, unlike gunshot wounds, stitches didn't need an explanation, because he didn't have one.

Chapter Seven

Casting Doubts

“So what do you do for a living?” asked the hairdresser.

“Well, for the past several years I’ve been doing voice-over work on *The Green Brigade*,” said Stefan. She showed no signs of recognition. He continued, “But I’ve recently started doing theatre production.” He liked the sound of that.

“Oh, that’s interesting,” she replied, not actually sounding interested, or like she knew what he meant. He was disappointed: he wanted to talk about the play. He needed to tell a stranger about his plans, because he still hadn’t told anyone close to him. He’d told David, his agent, to turn down the lucrative job in Los Angeles. If he could resist that, he figured, there was nothing that would stop him. But he was sure his friends would be hurt when he told them he was leaving. *Sure*, he thought, *that’s it. It’s the guys you’re worried about telling. It’s not that you’re scared of telling Mom, is it?* She knew about the play. But she didn’t know where it came from or where it was taking him.

The hairdresser indecisively air-snipped around his head, then focused on a patch near his forehead and dove in. Her scissors caught on something, a small blue thread — the last of the stitches left over from his fall outside the Matholic church several weeks ago.

“Ew,” said the hairdresser, pulling back.

“Ow,” said Stefan, following her movement with his head.

“Ew!” she said more forcefully, trying to tug her scissors free.

“Ow!” shouted Stefan, up out of his chair now, following her like a marionette.

She dropped the scissors, forcing Stefan to lean over so they would swing away from his face. He waddled about, clutching the air in front of him until he found the counter. He worked his way up that using the mirror to guide him, then carefully plucked the scissors free. He turned them around and snipped the blue thread from his forehead, then handed it to the hairdresser. “I think this is what you wanted,” he said. She winced.

He proceeded to the cashier, where he paid. Normally he’d haggle for a reduction in price — he’d yet to find a hairdresser or barber who didn’t hurt him somehow — but he had an important meeting this afternoon.

~

Helen pushed the small joystick on her wheelchair forward and her chair drove into the wall beside the elevator door. She pulled it back, and reversed into the wall behind her. She pushed it forward at an angle, and the chair arced forward, bumping into the wall beside the elevator. She sighed and rubbed her forehead. The machine did this when the battery ran low. *But no*, she thought, *I had to buy the fancy one*.

She felt someone pull on the chair’s handles. “I can get it,” she insisted. The person kept pulling her back from the wall. She rammed her joystick, spinning the chair to face whoever it was. “I said I can get — Oh, hello.”

“Hello,” said Stefan. “Long time no see.”

A moment passed in which either of them could have felt embarrassed for what had gone before, being caught out by Delonia. But they’d started a friendship, and a pilot light of affection remained lit. They smiled, then laughed, Stefan’s a sigh-laugh, Helen’s a familiar stretched-balloon sound.

“Stefan, I’m so sorry that the show got canned.”

“The *funding* got canned. The show’s still happening.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Can we go somewhere and talk?”

“You bet!” she said. She led him — in an awkward course that required his pulling her from the wall several times — to a conference room.

He dug through his knapsack and took out some papers, which he spread in front of her. "Here's breakdown and the budget I've come up with," he said. "I think I've saved up enough to make this happen. And I'm going to keep working right up until we leave."

She scanned the pages. "This all looks pretty good. I can see a few things we need to add, but I think we can work with this."

"Oh we can, can we?" he said with a smirk.

"If you'll have me back."

"Helen, I'd be an idiot not to. Thank you."

"No, thank you, Stefan, for not giving up." She went back to the pages. "So. There are just a few things missing here. There's no director."

"Yes there is."

"I don't see—"

"I want to direct."

"Stefan, *God* wants to direct. Do you really think—?" She stopped and scrutinised his face. "Yes, actually, I think that's a good idea. You grew up around this stuff, and no one has your particular, um, insight into the author. You're going to need one hell of a stage manager, though. More of a production manager-slash-assistant director, to fill in the blanks for you. And I know who that should be."

"Whatever you say, Helen."

"Exactly. You keep saying that."

~

"How's this?" asked Stefan, handing a scribbled draft of a casting notice across the bistro table to Helen. She took the page. He looked at his empty hand. It was shaking. He steadied it around the cup in front of him. He'd been drinking too much coffee during these regular meetings of theirs. He wondered if he might start vibrating so much that others wouldn't be able to see him. *I'll be the Ultraviolet Man*, he thought. Then he shook his head and pushed the cup away.

"You might want to change this bit," said Helen. "It sounds like he dies."

"But Seth does die in the third act."

"Yes, the *character* Seth dies, but this makes it sound like the *actor* dies. Actor's Equity tends to frown on snuff theatre."

"Oh," said Stefan.

A bell rang as someone opened the bistro door. Stefan looked up, and found himself transfixed, trying to figure out the sex of the person who'd walked in. He or she put down a large portfolio case, then took off a raincoat and hat and hung them on the coat-rack just inside the door, then ran large fingers through the close-cropped hair on the top of his or her head. Each finger of one hand was home to a large ring like those given to winning athletes. Each ear was adorned with small gold hoops from the lobe to the top of the ear. The person looked toward Stefan, who shot his eyes down to his papers, sure he'd been caught staring. The figure picked up the portfolio case and walked over to their table.

"Charlene!" said Helen. Charlene leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "So good to see you."

"Nice to see you, too," she said.

Stefan stood. "Hi, I'm Stefan." She shook his hand. Her strong grip didn't come as a surprise.

She sat. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"Oh," he said, "do you know my mother?"

"No. Who's your mother?"

Stefan had longed all his life to hear those words. Already he liked Charlene. "It doesn't matter. What did you mean, 'finally'?"

"Helen gave me your play a few months ago." Stefan looked to Helen, whose magnified eyes looked up innocently. "I loved it, and was looking forward to meeting you."

"Well thanks. I only adapted it, though. My dad wrote it."

"Oh," she said. "Well, I figured I should show you some of my work, to see if we might work together on it." She unzipped the case and pulled out a large stack of sketches, paintings, and photographs, which she handed to Stefan. He took them carefully, not accustomed to handling artwork. He pored over them, drinking them in. One set held an entire city neighbourhood, while another suggested a fantastic forest with curling purple trees and vines under a moonlit sky — all achieved with simple lines and swaths of colour. From her dense, large-scale productions to simple, sketchy intimations of time and place, Stefan found himself moved by each to a different time, place, and mood.

"I hope you don't mind," she said, "but I did a few sketches after reading your play." She gave these to him. He knew these places — the department store, the apartment, the hospital, the trench. Somehow she'd plucked them from his mind and put them on paper.

"You'd really be willing to work with us?" he asked. Charlene smiled. "How can we be this lucky?" He turned to Helen. "How can we be this lucky?"

Charlene answered. "I'm just getting back to work now — I've been out of commission for a while. I had a pretty serious operation."

Mmm, the one where you went home with your penis in a jar, thought Stefan. He felt guilty for the thought. "Well, whatever," he said, "we'd be honoured to have you come on board, if you want to. Here's the budget." He figured he might as well push his luck before he got too accustomed to the idea of her working on the play.

She looked over the figures. "Yeah, I can work with this."

"Holy crap!" said Stefan, elated.

"We've got to work on your poker face before the auditions," said Helen.

~

Norman Wallace bought a pint at the bar, then made his way over to the booth where Stefan sat and Helen parked. *He looked bigger on television*, thought Stefan. But then, most people did. *Except my mother*, he considered. Perhaps there was an outside limit on how much television could change your stature, and Delonia was at it.

"Hello," said the actor, slipping into the leather-padded booth.

"Hi," said Stefan, struggling to keep from giggling. He often met famous people through his mother, yet there was still something exciting about meeting television and movie actors for the first time, as if the camera rendered them holy when it spared them its attention, and Stefan, chosen company of such a one, was granted some of that importance. Here Stefan was meeting another of those luminous people, one whom he'd watched on television since he was little. Stefan never particularly liked Norman Wallace on *Broom Mates*, that never-ending Canadian show about the neighbourhood curling team. The show had enjoyed an undeserved immortality thanks to Canadian content laws. Maybe it was not Wallace himself but Wallace's character 'Horchek' he didn't like, always causing problems for the others with his arrogant superiority.

Stefan had no illusions anymore that meeting the famous would be of any particular benefit to him. You had to be ambitious about something for that to work, and until now Stefan didn't have anything they could help him with. Besides, he knew the entertainers themselves would never be the ones to go after, being more subject than anyone to the vagaries of their industry.

But his son, thought Stefan, *oh, his son. Maybe he can introduce me. Imagine if we got along, and...* Immediately his mind played out a sequence of events that spared him leaving and putting on the play, wrapped up instead in their affair, moving in together, relieved forever of any responsibility but being in love. He checked himself. It wasn't going to happen. The actor who played Wallace's son probably liked women. He'd also be in his late forties now, not the

fresh-faced twentysomething Stefan used to pine for. The two actors probably weren't in touch anyway. The show ended suddenly, when the network came up with a last-minute replacement for its time-slot, something even worse that didn't last long. But it did the job of eliminating *Broom Mates*. *Sitcomikaze*, thought Stefan, smiling into his beer.

Now Stefan had a chance to hire Norman Wallace to be in his show.

"Thanks for meeting with us, Mister Wallace," said Stefan.

"Please," answered the man with affected effort, "Norman."

"Thank you for meeting with us, Norman," said Stefan. "Helen says she gave you the script and you might be interested in the part."

"Absolutely, young man. I thought the play was thoroughly enjoyable, and made some very good points."

"Well, thank you. I'll pass that on," Stefan replied, hoping he wouldn't have to explain. Wallace didn't seem to know the play's history, or was too self-absorbed to think about it. Stefan found it odd to hear him talking without the Ukrainian accent he had in the show. He wondered how much of 'Horchek' was a fiction.

"Norman," said Helen, "I understand that you're interested in doing some theatre this summer."

A deft handling, thought Stefan, of "So, you're unemployed".

"How would you like to travel to Scotland to act in the world's largest theatre festival?"

"Ah, theatre," said Wallace fondly, dreamily. "You know, before that horrible television show I enjoyed several seasons at Stratford."

"Yes, I rememb—" Helen began.

"Oh, yes, those were grand years. Olivier told me he was jealous when he saw my *Coriolanus*."

Ugh, thought Stefan. The only thing that annoyed him more than real fame was trumped-up fame.

"Could you get me another drink, son? A single-malt, neat. Thank you."

"Uh, no problem," said Stefan. *I'm the director*, he thought, heading to the bar. *What kind of an audition is this?* He took a breath of the pub's visible atmosphere. *Chill. Wallace will be good for the show.*

Two hours later, Stefan could see that Helen was struggling to stay upright in her chair. Her magnified eyes fluttered beyond her control. Wallace was still talking. Stefan had stopped trying to follow what he said. Something about being drunk onstage with O'Toole. Stefan's head snapped up. "Of course, those reckless days are over," Wallace quickly corrected, aware for the first time, it seemed, of being under evaluation. "My wife wouldn't stand for any of that, on-stage or off."

Wallace looked out the pub's window for a minute, then excused himself to go to the bathroom.

"His wife is dead," said Helen, leaning forward. She spoke in a hurried frog *sotto voce* even though Wallace was out of earshot: "She died last year, and he's been a wreck since. Hasn't done any work at all. That's why we can get him. Everyone's worried he can't do it anymore, but I know he can. He's a pro. He won't let you down. And you can get him for scale."

"Helen! You're heartless!"

"I've got a heart. It's just very small." She downed her drink. "Shut him up and make him an offer."

~

Stefan felt self-conscious about his legs. They were skinny and pale, sticking out of his long skateboarder shorts. Before leaving the house, he looked at himself in the mirror. With his drooping hair, his thin frame, and his short stature, he looked like a teenager. *Far from it*, he

thought. But it was too late to change. He had to get over to the rehearsal hall Helen booked for the auditions. He put his headphones on and headed out, avoiding Delonia and Cerise, who were in the back garden.

The day was hot, and the sun made the sidewalk shine blinding and white. Stefan's spirits were buoyed up by the energetic music in his ears. The song ended, and another began. He didn't like this song, because it started with a spoken bit. Stefan didn't understand why, but recorded music didn't conjure up the second voice. As soon as the spoken passage began, though, that other voice poked through. *Didnae. Gunnae.*

How can you miss someone you don't know? he wondered. Before he could answer himself, he fast-forwarded to the musical part of the song.

~

Stefan felt even more self-conscious of his legs. What a picture they made, Helen and he sitting on the side of the cheap wooden table opposite the actor — Stefan looking like a camp counsellor and Helen just being herself. Fluorescent lights buzzed above their heads. The varnish on the floorboards was worn through, and the white walls were peeling, exposing a layer of sky blue. Long mirrors hung on one wall with a wooden bar in front of them.

The young man was formally dressed, wearing an ironed white shirt with a tie, dress slacks, and a tweed jacket.

Stefan looked over the head-shot and résumé he'd been handed. He nodded and hmm-ed as he examined it, though it might as well have been a stock analysis for all it meant to him. He passed it over to Helen, his hand trembling slightly with nerves. Stefan looked at the actor and smiled. The actor smiled calmly back. Stefan felt like he had no right putting this man on trial, asking him to do his act for him, who had never done anything like this before. Stefan got all his vocal work using a demo tape. *How do these actors put up with this?* he thought.

Luckily, the actor expected the audition to be the usual drill, so he led himself through it, standing up and moving away from them, offering first to do a classical piece, which Stefan didn't really understand. Then he did something from a modern play called *Downstairs from Father*, which wound up with him agonising about his father's death. Stefan caught himself picturing what he'd have for lunch.

The actor finished, and Stefan found himself babbling to the man, saying that they had lots of people to see and it would be very hard to decide, and they didn't know how long it would take them to choose the cast. Helen cut him off. "Thank you," said Helen. "We'll let you know." The actor nodded, thanked them, and left.

"You don't have to tell them anything," said Helen. "In fact, it's better if you don't give any indication at all. That way you don't lead them on."

"Oh."

"So what did you think?"

"I dunno," said Stefan. "Not much of anything. I was thinking about myself — I was kind of nervous—"

"Yeah, I got that."

"I found it was hard to pay attention to him."

"Good," said Helen. "Listen to your instincts during this process. Imagine you were an audience member watching him in a show, and you found yourself drifting like that. Who knows what the reason was? Maybe he just broke up with his girlfriend. Maybe he wasn't sure of his lines. The point is that you, watching him, didn't feel connected to him."

"True. Even when he was going on about his dad, I didn't really care. But that seems kind of cruel, to make him go through that and then not hire him."

"It's not social work," quipped Helen. "You don't owe anyone a job, particularly not if they're going to make your play boring."

Stefan made a guilty face.

"Go get the next person," she told him.

A minute later, Stefan walked back into the room, followed by a tall man with curly red hair. "Hello!" he said to Helen as Stefan sat back down beside her. He dug into his knapsack and handed a résumé and head-shot to both of them, then sat in front of them.

"Tell us a little about yourself," said Stefan, feeling a bit more in control. He looked at Helen, who rolled her eyes at the stock interview question.

"Well," said the actor, "I'm a singer, dancer, actor, model, make-up artist, clothing designer—"

Waiter, thought Stefan.

"So what have you prepared for us?" interrupted Helen.

The actor held out a 'one minute' finger, and reached into his bag. He pulled out a stereo and put it on the table, then fished through his pocket for a cassette tape. He blew on it, then put it into the stereo and pressed down the Play button. He ran into the centre of the room and shook his head and his arms to loosen them. The music started, and the actor raised his hands dramatically to the ceiling. With each pounding note, the actor moved into another dramatic stance. Stefan knew this song. *What is it?* he thought. *Oh God: "Eye of the Tiger"*.

The lanky man whirled and spun, dropped to the floor, twisted there, extended legs and arms, crouched, tumbled, and jumped. He hopped around the room, and finished as the song ended, reaching with open fingers toward Helen and Stefan.

"We're casting a *play*," said Helen.

The tape reached its end and the Play button popped up.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

Stefan piped in. "But thank you for your, um. For doing that. For us. Thanks."

The actor collected his things, including his headshots, from the table, and slinked to the door.

"Thanks," insisted Stefan.

The actor lifted his middle finger at him and left.

"Ho-kay," said Stefan, pausing a moment before fetching the next actor.

The next man followed Stefan into the room as if being led to the gallows. After a brief introduction, he pushed his chair backwards, and stood. "I'm going to do a piece from the play *Downstairs from Father*," he said. He took a deep breath and looked at the chair. He shook visibly. "You!" he said to the chair, shaking. He took quick, panting breaths. Then he collapsed.

Stefan and Helen waited a moment, but this was not part of the act. The man had fainted.

"Alright then," said Stefan. "Lunch."

~

Stefan threw the last crust of his "Bacon Frenzy" pizza into the box. Helen's much smaller, unfinished "Garden Grazer" pizza and its box fit easily inside. He did his best to fold and stuff them into the garbage can as the next scheduled actor walked into the rehearsal hall.

"Hello," said Stefan, his mouth half full. He took his seat beside Helen. The actor looked at her, as if she were a special effect. "Hello?" repeated Stefan.

"Sorry," said the young man. "I, I'm here for my audition at 1:15."

"Right on time, then," said Helen. The actor jolted in his chair, not expecting her to speak. He recovered, muttering details about the school he'd just graduated from, where he read about the audition, and how interested he was in the show (though the casting call listed only the roles and the play's title).

"So what have you prepared for us?" asked Stefan, getting into the swing of it.

"Um, it's from a play." He laughed. "I guess that's obvious. It's, um, it's from a play called *Downstairs from Father*." Stefan and Helen nodded. "I'm reading Lenny's monologue

from the third act.” Stefan and Helen nodded again. The actor shuffled his chair back, then stood up and faced it. He turned briefly to Helen and Stefan. “I’m going to start now.”

“Any time,” said Helen.

The actor turned back and addressed a figure sitting in the chair. Judging from the angle of the actor’s gaze, he was speaking to someone two feet tall. “You!” the actor shouted. He turned and stomped away, then wheeled around to address the figure again, who was now eleven feet high. “You!” he screamed. His chest heaved, and he started sobbing. He dropped to the floor in a heap, convulsing with emotion.

Helen and Stefan waited for several minutes while the young man cried. The pretext of acting evaporated, and Stefan went over to him. “Are you alright?” The actor held up a hand, as if to say he’d be okay. Stefan helped him up.

“I—” said the young man through his tears. “I—” he repeated, and walked out of the room.

Helen looked at Stefan.

He shrugged.

She called to the door: “Next!”

The door opened, and Paulo entered. Stefan jumped up, relieved. “Paulo!” he said, going over to hug his friend. “What are you doing here? Helen, this is my friend Paulo.” Without a beat, Paulo went to her and gently shook her hand.

“My agent sent me,” he said to Stefan, handing him a head-shot and résumé. “But what are *you* doing here? What’s this about? I haven’t seen you in ages, and now you’re doing a play?”

“Oh yeah, that,” he said. They sat down. “I’ve been meaning to tell you and the guys about it.”

“Does your friend here want to audition for us?” asked Helen, smiling slyly at Paulo. “He’s awfully handsome.” Stefan looked at her, stunned by her flirtation. He’d never considered her in that way before.

“Thanks,” replied Paulo, “but I’ve decided to stay in Toronto this summer.” He grinned. “I’m moving into Adam’s place, and we’re going to use the money we save to buy a cottage.”

Helen’s face drooped. “I should have known. Well, you two have some catching up to do, so I say we call it a day.” She gathered her things up from the table and put them into a satchel on her lap. She drove back from the table, and away toward the door.

“Wait,” said Stefan, “that’s it? That was our first day of auditions? But everyone was terrible!”

Helen shrugged. “This is how it works. There’s still tomorrow.” She gestured with her head toward the door. Stefan ran over to open it, and she cruised out.

“The Edinburgh Fringe?” asked Paulo. “What’s that about?”

“Well, it turns out that my dad wrote a play. And I decided to put it on. I’m leaving, Paulo.”

“I gathered that. When will you be back?”

Stefan shook his head. His expression lit up. “That’s it. I’m outta here. I’m going to Scotland.”

“It’s your mother, isn’t it?”

Stefan laughed. “Well, kinda. That’s what started it. But now — I can’t explain, really. Things are leading me there. I was worried about telling you guys. I didn’t want to let you down, or make you think it was easy for me to leave you behind.”

“Hey, we move on. Friends do that. You can’t stand still for your friends. Hell, you think if Allen got an offer to relocate to New York or LA he wouldn’t take it? Or if Rick’s girlfriend asked him to go to Malaysia with her he wouldn’t jump at the chance?”

“You’re right,” said Stefan.

“You haven’t exactly been happy here.” Paulo stood up. “Let’s call the others up, and you can tell them. We’ll go celebrate.”

Stefan walked to the door with him. Paulo gave him one of his big, handsome smiles. “This is great. I’m really happy for you,” he said. But Stefan didn’t think he looked particularly happy, even with the smile.

~

For the second day of the auditions, Stefan arrived dressed more like what he imagined a theatre director should look like — brown corduroys, a black turtleneck, and a jacket with patches on the elbows. Looking at himself in the rehearsal hall mirror, though, it suddenly seemed like a mistake. It was a bit too Seventies, a bit too Fosse. He felt gay.

Helen rolled in holding a paper cup of coffee in her non-driving hand. “Who are you supposed to be?” she asked. Stefan’s heart sank. He had a long day ahead, and already wanted to go home.

Stefan put on a haughty cartoon voice. “I’m a thee-a-tah dih-rec-tor.”

“Oh,” she said, her smirk barely hidden by the cup of coffee.

“Right,” he said, moving to the table and looking over a clipboard there, “we’ve only got five parts to cast. We can do this.”

“Yes, yes we can,” Helen assured him. “We’ve got a lot of people lined up. So why don’t you go get the first person and we can get started.”

“Right,” said Stefan, snapping his fingers. A moment later, he returned from the hallway with a young woman. Out of her line of vision, Stefan raised his eyebrows hopefully toward Helen and mouthed “Truna”, one of the characters’ names. Helen made a barely perceptible nod of agreement. The actress was pretty, with fairytale colouring — pale skin and rosy cheeks, large green eyes, and blonde hair that was chopped roughly into a playful pixie fire.

The young woman strode confidently to the table and gave her résumé and picture to Helen. She put her bag down — all actors carried overstuffed bags, Stefan noticed — and walked back to the middle of the room. She ran a hand through her hair, and nodded to them that she was ready to start. They liked this, her readiness to get down to business, her confidence.

“So what are you going to do for us today?” asked Stefan, now versed in audition phraseology.

“I’ve been studying movement under a Bulgarian clown master, so I’ve put together a little piece called ‘The Bus Stop’.”

“Oh,” said Stefan.

The woman stood upright, and then contorted as if shot. Her body curved into a C, and she tip-toed back and forth. She moved her arms in tiny waves, then jerked them up and down. Finally, she dropped to the floor, rolled, and sprang back up, her hands raised, opening like flowers, toward the ceiling. Then her shape melted back into a regular standing position and she stared at Helen and Stefan.

They waited.

She blinked.

They sat politely.

“I’m finished,” she said.

“Oh!” said Stefan. “Thanks. That was really— um.” He grasped for something to say. “So what’s your availability?”

“Well, I’m going to be away in August. I’m going to Myanmar for a workshop on mime for the oppressed.”

“Damn! That’s when our show opens in Edinburgh. Oh, that’s too bad. Well, thanks for coming by.” He got up and walked with her to the door. “All the best with your... thing.”

They shook hands, and the woman left. Another woman walked in. She smiled and handed Stefan her head-shot and résumé. They walked to the table and sat down.

“So, tell us a bit about yourself,” asked Stefan. He knew now that it was a horrible question, but the whole situation was horrible. Neither party knew each other, yet they both knew that one of them was on trial. So it was something to say.

“Well, my name’s Rebecca. I come from Vancouver, and I’ve been here for thirteen months. This is my fiftieth audition. Yay me!” she said, mocking herself. “Apparently I’m not talented enough to sell cat food, feminine hygiene products, or even to be a tight T-shirted bimbo in a beer ad. I’m not a waitress — oh, no — I’m a *hostess* at the Pizza Piazza. And I only moved here because of Josh, and now he’s—” she continued talking, but Stefan didn’t know what she was saying, because she spoke into a tissue she pulled from her pocket. He watched the top of her head, which began to move up and down. His fears were confirmed: a moment later she sobbed out loud, and made a whistling sound as she struggled for breath. Her crying intensified, the sobs coming faster, the whistling gasps a fast staccato. She muttered something about being sorry, then tried to stand. Her eyes rolled up, and she fell to the floor.

Stefan jumped up, but was too late to catch her. He turned to Helen. “Crying *and* fainting. That’s new.” He reached under her arms and dragged her to the hallway, where he sat her in a chair, her head leaning against the wall as she breathed slowly.

“Next,” said Stefan. None of the actors moved.

~

Helen looked at her watch. “We’ve only got time to see four more people.”

“Crap,” said Stefan. “Well, it’s not over until the fat lady sings. And we haven’t had one of *them* yet.” He sang in an operatic falsetto voice as the next auditioner entered the room. “Hello,” he said, smiling at her. He had to: she looked so nice. She had long, soft brown hair, perfect skin, a perfect tiny wedge of a nose, and the kind of casual clothes that made her look like one of the happy people who live on the pages of a catalogue.

“Hello,” she said, reaching across the table to shake their hands. “My name’s Maria.”

Stefan smiled, feeling at ease. There was something peaceful about her, and he liked it. “Hi, Maria. I’m Stefan. This is Helen. So, what have you prepared—” he began, then stopped. He shook his head. “No,” he said, reaching into his own overstuffed bag, “I have a better idea. I’d like you to do a reading from the play.” He flipped through the pages, then handed a few to her. “Could you look over these and read Vella’s monologue for me? Take your time.”

Helen looked at him, surprised. She caught his glance and gave him a “Good idea” nod. She was letting him direct the day’s proceedings, quietly watching to see how he handled himself. But she provided the nods, like a mother horse nosing her foal onto its feet.

Maria took the pages to the centre of the room, read them for a few minutes, then indicated that she was ready. Before she read, she dropped her head and folded her hands. Her lips moved slightly.

“Is she—?”

“Yes,” said Helen, “I think she’s praying.”

“Oh God.”

“Exactly.”

Maria lifted her head, shook out her hair, then delivered the lines. Her demeanour changed as she spoke, transforming her into the subtle temptress in the story. She started walking as she spoke, one leg curving seductively around the other, her one hand holding the script, and the other making gentle, undulating movements. She owned each sentence she spoke, delivering the lines with nuance, each mounting the other until she gave the final words in an orgasmic crescendo.

Finished, she lowered the script to her side and changed back into the catalogue-woman.

“Holy crap!” Stefan burst out. Helen gave him a stern look, but he continued on. “You are *so* hired. If you want the part, it’s yours.”

"Really?" she squealed with an innocence that belied the complexity of who she'd been just a moment before. "Oh my goodness!"

"Are you available in August?" asked Helen.

"Well, I was supposed to be a counsellor at a youth camp, but I'm sure my minister would understand. He knows how much I've been trying to get my acting career going. And my parents — well, they'll just have to live with it. Yes, I'd love to do it!"

"Great!" said Stefan, not sure what to do next. "Well, we've got your details on your résumé. This is your correct phone number, right?" She nodded. "Okay, well we'll be in touch to send you the contract and arrange rehearsals and all that stuff. Congratulations!"

"Thank you so much!" she said, shaking their hands again. "Hee!" she yelped as she ran from the room.

Stefan looked at Helen. "I know what you're going to say, but save it. I want her."

"You just hired Gospel Girl to play the whore. You don't see any conflicts?"

"She can act."

"Yes, well she'll have to," quipped Helen, "because I don't think she has much to draw on there."

Stefan stuffed his fingers into his ears. "La la la," he sang, as the next actor walked into the room.

"Hi, I'm Thom," said the young man. He had a full head of sandy brown curls and a sharply-trimmed goatee. Stefan recognised the trousers he had on: Stefan owned the same kind, hemp, with buttons of recycled plastic. His shirt was made of a loose weave, with a Nehru collar, open at the neck, where the actor's chest hair showed through.

"So what have you prepared for us today?" asked Stefan.

"What have I prepared?" he replied, sounding offended. "What have I prepared, you ask me. How dare you? How dare you ask what I've prepared! What have *you* prepared? Are you prepared for this day? Are you prepared for any day? You may think you're some kind of god, but you're just a man, a man playing God." For several more minutes, the actor ranted, growing angrier and angrier, until he spat accusations and threats at Stefan. Finally he jumped up on the table and grabbed Stefan by his turtleneck. "And I ask you," he screamed in Stefan's face, the spittle making him blink, "are *you* prepared?"

He let go of Stefan, who dropped back into his chair. He sat down and cleared his throat. "That was 'Jake' from *The Nightmare's Actor*."

Stefan cocked his head. "Oh. That was your piece? Oh!" He laughed uncomfortably, still shaken. "Oh. Ha!" He turned to Helen. "That was him acting. Haha."

"I've got another piece," said Thom.

"I don't think I'm insured for this," said Stefan.

"No, you'll like it. Wait." He moved his chair further back, and cleared his throat. He closed his eyes and made a low, humming noise. He breathed in a strange, audible way, then opened his eyes and made a loud "Ha!" noise. "Okay," he said to Helen and Stefan, "here it is."

He spoke to an imaginary person, who, as he continued, turned out to be his grandmother. He held her hand, and told her things quietly that made Stefan laugh, and by the end of the piece, made his throat tighten with emotion. When he finished, Thom dropped his head, then looked up at them.

"That was nice," said Stefan. "I really liked it." Thom thanked them, and left the room.

"I hate to say it, Helen, but I think he'd be great as Seth. He's a complete and utter freak, mind you."

Helen turned to look at him. "Well, you're not casting for friends, you're casting for the characters in the show. And I have to agree. He's going to give you everything he's got. God knows what that is, but you're going to get all of it."

"Yeah."

"Put him on this pile, then," said Helen, indicating the smaller of the two stacks of photos and résumés in front of her.

Stefan uncomfortably slid his papers into the 'Winners' pile, uncomfortable about the implications of the other pile. "So are we calling the people we're not hiring?"

"We don't have to, but I think it's a good practice, so they're not left hanging."

"So you don't mind?"

"Me? Oh, right, your telephone thing. Yeah, I can make the calls when we're finished auditioning."

Stefan looked at his clipboard. "We've only got two more people scheduled. What happens if they don't—?"

"It's not over yet," said Helen, sorting through the résumés. "Here, this is a submission we got from an agent. She's up next." Stefan took the résumé, but didn't get further than the photograph.

"Holy! She's beautiful." He flipped the photo over to look at the credits listed there in professional-looking type. "She's done a lot, too. Let's call her in here." He headed for the door.

"Wait a sec', Stefan. Just so you don't — hypothetically speaking, of course — get into an awkward social situation: people don't usually look like their headshots. Some of them are very flattering. So no goofy double-takes if you're expecting Venus de Milo and Ernest Borgnine walks into the room."

"Right. Got it." He opened the door. "Serena Knight?" he asked, poking his head around. Helen saw Stefan go goggle-eyed and sighed. *She must be pretty bad*, she thought.

Stefan walked back in, his eyes still wide, with Serena behind him. "Holy crap," whispered Helen unconsciously.

The woman ran a hand through her long black hair, which reflected the light like a moonlit lake. Her face was a perfect, chiselled shape, the only colour added by some light powder. A shiny blue dress clung to her curved body. "Hi," she said, utterly self-possessed, as if she weren't auditioning but accepting an award. She gave Helen a sideways look that was all too familiar: pity, as if she were something lesser, an unfortunate accident, then gave a laughing smile clearly intended to charm, but it was too late.

Stefan, missing this, asked her to sit down. Helen could see that he was taken with her. She thought perhaps his natural inclinations might have inured him to her effect, but no. He was a child of the media, and bought it all.

"Sorry I'm so dressed up," she said. "My boyfriend is coming by to take me out for dinner afterward."

"No problem," said Stefan. "You look nice. Ha, 'nice'. Not exactly the word. Um, hey, this is a great résumé. I know these shows — *West City Beat*, *Glamour Squad*."

"Those weren't big parts. Well, I was a recurring on *Glamour Squad*. There was talk of my character joining the team. But then I died."

"I'm so sorry. How did it happen?"

"They dropped a police car on me."

"Hmm. Pretty hard to recover from that. Oh, wow, it says here that you sing, too."

"Yeah, I did some backup vocals in studio for Stacey Hillman, The Hinges, Delonia Mackech—"

"Hee," laughed Helen. Stefan glared at her.

"What?" asked Serena.

"Nothing," insisted Stefan. "So. What will you be doing for us today?"

It surprised neither of them that she acted well. Her piece was calm and thoughtful, with several subtle shifts in it. They appreciated being spared a big emotional outburst, intentional or otherwise. Even Helen couldn't deny that the woman had everything. When Stefan looked to her at the end of her piece, she nodded.

"Here are the dates," he said. "We're paying scale and arranging accommodations. No *per diem*. Is this all okay?"

"Sure," she said, "I think this will be a good opportunity. So does that mean—?"

Helen gave another nod. "Yeah, I'd like to offer you the lead female role, 'Truna'."

"That's great!" she said — happy, but not surprised. She stood. "So you can send the details to my agent. If he gives you any hassle, you just tell him I said I wanted this part."

"Great!" said Stefan. "We'll be in touch."

"Thank you," she said, standing. The door opened behind her. A tall man with huge arms and a broad, defined chest walked in. His long black hair was full of ringlets. "Sorry," Serena said to Helen and Stefan, "this is my boyfriend, Leonidas."

"How did it go?" he asked, touching her arm gently. They were both so attractive and enthralled with each other that their intimacy filled the room. Stefan and Helen felt like voyeurs.

Serena faced away from them, but they could see her make little triumph fists at her side and hear her squeal. Leonidas smiled and took her under one of his arms, which flexed of its own accord. He waved to Helen and Stefan and led her from the room. "That's great," they heard him say, "let's go have dinner, and then we can—" The door closed, sparing Stefan and Helen the rest.

"Why is she free?" asked Helen, partly to herself.

"Because there are more actors than there is work," said Stefan.

"For someone like her?"

"Hm."

The door opened. "Hello?" asked a man about Stefan's age. He bounded in. "Am I next?"

"Uh," said Stefan, reaching for his clipboard.

"Chris Cook. I *am* next. It says so on the list outside. My asking was a formality." He rushed up to the table and placed two cupcakes on it. He took two candles from his knapsack, stuck them into the cupcakes and lit them. As if letting them in on a secret, he whispered, "It's a party."

They looked appropriately confused.

"C'mon. Auditions are like funerals, but without the fun. Which would make them 'erals', wouldn't it?" He laughed at this. "Go on! Blow them out!" he said, pointing at their cupcakes. Stefan hesitantly put Helen's within her reach, then they blew out the candles.

"Wasn't that fun? I think every occasion should be a party." He stood and flounced to the middle of the room and rubbed his hands through his strawberry-blonde hair. "Well," he said, "aren't you going to say 'So what have you prepared for us today' or something?"

"Yeah," said Stefan, uncomfortable with having this person running his audition, "I guess that's what's next."

"Well!" he said exaggeratedly. "I'm going to do Lenny's monologue from *Downstairs from Father*."

Oh God, thought Stefan.

"Just give me a second," said Chris the actor. He turned his back to them and shook his shoulders. He cleared his throat, then turned around slowly and seriously. He pointed a finger at an imaginary figure seated next to him. "You! You think I don't know the truth about Mom?" he started. Stefan wasn't sure if he was more impressed that Chris was the first person to get through the piece, or that he managed to do it as someone of gravity, someone other than the person who first skipped into the room. He worked through the piece's emotional twists, even finding a few moments of humour.

Chris finished the piece, kneeling in front of the figure, crying. He paused a moment, then stood, wiping tears from his face. The character's tears. *He* was fine.

"That was very good," said Helen.

"Yeah," added Stefan, "you were so—" *Crap*, he thought. He'd dug a hole.

"Manly"? Is that the word?" asked Chris without malice, sitting on the arm of the chair in front of them. "It's called acting, hun. People act gay all the time and get awards for their bravery. Why shouldn't I be able to act straight?"

Stefan shook his head.

“How do you feel about doing a reading?” asked Helen. She pushed a script forward. “Take a look at page twenty-four. I want you to read Heck’s monologue.”

Stefan shot her a look. *That’s the male lead.* He’d pictured his father, but younger, in the role.

Chris took a few moments to go over the lines, then gave — as Stefan feared — a nuanced, convincing reading. Helen confirmed his availability, which also worked out. She thanked him for coming in, and he curtsied. He gave Stefan’s hand a hard shake, and punched him on the shoulder. “Take it easy, cowboy,” he said in a John Wayne voice, then picked up his bag and swaggered out of the room.

My John Wayne is better, thought Stefan.

Helen looked over her list. “We’ve got everyone we need, Stefan.”

“Yeah, I guess we do. God, they’re all going to want me to direct them.”

“Yup. And you’re going to be great.”

“Want to get out of here?” he asked. She nodded, and gathered her things. As they left the room, Stefan looked back in at the blank walls and the holy barricade of a cheap wooden table. He’d never see this room again, and that was just fine. It did its work, and now there was an inescapable momentum to his plans.

Hope we got what you wanted, Dad, he thought, shutting the door.

Chapter Eight

Final Dress

Stefan pulled the car into the curved driveway of the convention centre, which was lit by hundreds of small bulbs overhead and the hot lights of the press above. He got out and handed the keys to the valet, then opened the passenger door. Delonia stepped out in a long turquoise dress that made her look like a high waterfall. Photographers stepped forward and snapped pictures of her. She stopped and smiled politely for them, knowing she had to play the press's game or be subject to scorn about her appearance, her music, or — most feared — her lifestyle. After a media scuffle several years before, one tabloid printed pictures of her from this same annual event, on Stefan's arm, accusing her of having a new "boy toy". Stefan wasn't sure at the time whether he was more put off by the accusation or by their complete ignorance of his existence as her son. One television special about her life declared that "her songs are her children". After these events, Delonia made it up to him by mentioning him repeatedly in public, which was worse.

Delonia linked her hand in his, waved to the reporters and the crowd outside the convention centre, and they walked inside. The lobby was elaborately decorated, as was the large hall where the ceremony would take place. Television cameras stood on either side of the stage, hanging down on their large bases as if asleep. Large round tables filled the rest of the room. Stefan and Delonia joined Cerise, who pouted into her large, fruity drink. Not only had Delonia asked her to arrive separately, she had to work that night, playing in the show's orchestra.

Stefan sat, and a cater-waiter quickly came over to them. Stefan looked at him. *Oh God*, he thought.

"Hello, Sir, can I get you something to drink?" asked the waiter, a tall young man with curly red hair. Just weeks before this same actor-singer-dancer-waiter had given Stefan 'the finger' after his audition.

He knows it's me, thought Stefan. *He knows I know it's him*. But the waiter did nothing but wait sullenly for their drink order. *This is the Canadian equivalent of a bar room brawl*, thought Stefan, *being impolite to each other*. "Uh, just a ginger ale for me," said Stefan as nicely as possible, "and a soda water for—"

"Make mine a double bourbon," corrected Delonia. Stefan flared his eyes at her.

"Very good," said the waiter, rising on the balls of his feet, then darting away.

Every year since his father died, Stefan came to this music awards event with his mother, yet he could never remember the name of it. He always got it confused with its American equivalent, so he just referred to it as the "Piece of Glass Awards", since that's what they left with year after year. They didn't even bother displaying them anymore; there was no pride for winning in a category with no other nominations. He suspected that the governing body invented categories for her music so she could win, either out of kindness or to keep her ratings up.

The room soon filled up with other Canadian performers, their coteries, and people who thought impressive company was worth the exaggerated ticket price. Canada produced a disproportionate number of music stars, many of whom remained conscious of their roots and made yearly appearances at this event. Stefan saw a few people this year he thought were dead. He double-checked to make sure they weren't visions like his father, but they weren't, just entertainers who hadn't died yet. *Perhaps*, he figured, *they're showing up just to prove they're alive*.

A young man came to their table, dressed in a borrowed-looking suit. He smiled at Delonia. "Oh," she said, "Stefan, this is George—"

"Jeff."

"Jeff. He's, uh, a young doctor I met. I figured you didn't have a date, so I invited him along." Stefan gave her a flat look and tried to kill her with his mind. She remained alive and sipped her drink.

Stefan looked at the doctor and nodded his head. He thought the young man was handsome, especially his smile. He was nicely tanned, and not too tall. *He's the kind of good-looking that comes in calendars*, thought Stefan, *so flawless he's almost bland. Almost.*

"Mind if I sit down?" he asked. Stefan detected a trace of a New York accent.

"Oh, sorry. Not at all," said Stefan. Jeff sat next to him, pulled in his chair, scuffing it across the carpet, and banging it into Stefan's. Jeff laughed and smiled at him. Stefan felt Jeff's leg press against his.

Cerise stood up. "I have to go work now," she said, and lumbered away from them as if wounded, heading for a door beside the stage. Two couples arrived and took the rest of the seats at the table. One of the women announced that her friends were there to indulge her: She was a huge Delonia Mackechnie fan. "Well, then," said Stefan, "you and she have a lot in common." Delonia graciously overlooked the comment and proceeded to ask the woman all about herself and her friends.

Delonia gestured, and the make-up-artist-costume-designer-cater-waiter brought them another round of drinks. Stefan and Jeff sat in silence while Delonia held court with the fan and her friends. The orchestra took their seats and tuned up while the stage crew made final checks of the set. Not wanting to be left dry when the show started, Delonia ordered them more drinks.

Stefan turned and asked the young doctor, "So do you have a practice, or do you work out of a hospital?"

Jeff looked confused.

The orchestra came to life, filling the room with opening music for the show, a medley of the year's Canadian hits. Stefan even recognised a few bars from a song he'd heard his mother rehearse at home.

The next few hours were familiar territory for Stefan. In the breaks, he and Jeff made chit-chat. He liked Jeff. The "Maybe..." portion of his brain whirled, recalculating. *Maybe I shouldn't leave Toronto. Maybe I don't have to go with the show. Maybe I can still do what Dad wants but still stay here. Maybe Jeff has a great condo and I can move in.*

Stefan did his best to be charming, searching for witty, knowingly cynical things to say about the event that would impress Jeff. "These shows make me sick, the recording industry congratulating itself and throwing ornaments to artists to thank them for bringing in lots of money. But the second the musician stops being useful, they're chucked back into the bar circuit."

"It's cool that your mother is so famous. I've never been to one of these before." said Jeff. "I mean, who can afford tickets?"

"Yeah," said Stefan, unsure now. "You'd have to be a doctor or something."

"Really!" said Jeff, smiling.

"Or have someone buy you a ticket."

Jeff's smile wilted.

"Holy crap," said Stefan. "My mother paid you. Are you an esco—?" But the music started up again before he could finish.

Onstage, a young waif in a pink elfin dress read from an electronic prompter. "In the category of Best Variety Hour Holiday Special by a Female Folk Artist Singing in Both Official Languages, the nominees are—"

Stefan felt Jeff's hand searching across his lap. His mother looked at him and smiled. He stared with wide, blank eyes. Jeff groped him expertly under the table.

"—Delonia Mackechnie," said the girl. She opened a small envelope. "And the winner is... Delonia Mackechnie!"

Delonia smiled and rose from her chair. She waved for Stefan to go with her to collect the award. He shook his head no. She gave him a look, half-angry, half-hurt. Stefan grabbed Jeff's hand and threw it from his lap, and got up from his seat. He buttoned his jacket and tried to pull it closed.

Delonia took his arm and they walked to the stage. They walked up the small staircase together and she crossed to the podium. He stood behind her, trying to hide. She read from a speech she'd written on recipe cards, and Stefan turned to face the back of the stage. The waif-presenter looked at him, then looked down. Her hand flew to her mouth, and she giggled. Stefan felt a hand on his shoulder. Delonia was thanking him for his support, and wanted him beside her. He turned and tried to angle himself behind the podium. Delonia stood back, thinking he wanted to speak.

"Um, thank you. I mean, we thank you. I know these awards — this award — means a lot to my mother." Then he realised the podium was made of clear glass. "Oh God," he said. "God, it's great to see so much Canadian talent here tonight. Thanks for supporting my mom." Delonia held the large glass wedge of the award in one hand, and grabbed Stefan's hand with the other, raising their arms in the air. Stefan saw himself on the two giant monitors in the hall, his trousers poking out between the flaps of his jacket. He pushed his mother's hand down and rushed them from the stage.

Back at the table, Delonia stopped smiling and turned on him. "What's the matter with you?"

Jeff spoke up, "I think he's just happy to see—"

"Shut up," said Stefan, standing back up. "I'm leaving."

"The show's not over yet," said Delonia.

"I mean I'm leaving Toronto. I'm leaving Canada. All this stuff — you — I have to get away." He stormed from the hall.

~

"Boy, you were sure happy about your mother winning that award!" said Jean, the producer of *The Green Brigade*, as she watched highlights from the previous night's awards show on the green room television. The newspaper on the coffee-table ran a picture of her acceptance, too. He figured it was the media's version of an in-joke, as he was clearly visible in all of them.

Stefan tried to kill Jean with his mind, but the trick didn't work on her, either.

Jean crossed her hands on her lap. "The lead animators have finished the pencil tests for this year's shows. We're ready to do the recording, start inking key-frames, then farm the in-betweens to Korea again. So are you going to sign the contract, or not?"

"Yeah, about that," said Stefan. "No."

Jean sighed and looked at the ceiling. "Stefan, come on. We've got Globoil as a sponsor this year. We can give you a raise, if it's money you want."

Stefan stood. "No, I'm not coming back. Sorry. The show's become an apologist piece of corporate PR crap, and I've got other plans. I appreciate all you and the show have done for me, but it's time for me to leave." He held out a hand to Jean, who did not accept it. Stefan shrugged, and left, walking down the studio hallway for the last time, and out into a bright afternoon. He took a long, deep breath of the humid city air, and coughed.

He walked down to the waterfront, crossing busy stretches of road where the highway passed through the city. He kept walking until he reached the waterfront. On a whim, he rode a ferry to one of the man-made islands in the lake, and sat on its sandy shore with his feet in the water, looking back at the giant glass machine of a city.

~

"Ten minutes to curtains up," said Charlene to Stefan. She wore a headset, through which she spoke unintelligible cues to the lighting and sound man. On the road, she would be running the whole show, but the rehearsal theatre had strict union rules about who did what. Stefan learned this when he moved a chair on the stage and was taken aside for a stern talking-to by one of the stage crew.

Stefan went to the women's dressing room and knocked on the door. Maria answered, wearing a thick, fluffy dressing-gown. "Hello," she said, smiling.

"Five minutes till places. Good luck."

Serena popped up behind Maria, wearing a long, red silk robe. She held a small green book. Stefan had come to dread the sight of it — *The Actors' Equity Handbook* — during the three weeks of rehearsals. "Stefan, this dressing room is not regulation temperature. I was wondering if you could do something about that. I wouldn't complain, except it's dangerous to our health, and Equity has strict guidelines about that, and fines for violations." He didn't need reminding about the latter, as he'd already paid a "Violation of Rest Period" fine for a rehearsal that ran too late into the evening. Serena had appointed herself Equity Deputy for the show, and was better acquainted with the handbook than with the play.

"I'll look into it. Places in five," said Stefan.

Serena grabbed his arm before he could leave. "What did Charlene say about making that change to my costume?"

"She said no," Stefan lied, as he pulled away and headed for the men's dressing room.

He knocked and opened the door. "Five min— Oh my God." Chris stood in the middle of the room in his 'dance belt', a flesh-coloured thong that formed his genitals into a conspicuous pear shape in front and rode between his buttocks in the back.

Chris raised his hands over his head and posed. "Guten tag, Herr Director," he said in a sultry Marlene Dietrich voice, slinking toward him.

Stefan backed away. "Uh, hi. Where's Thom?"

Chris pointed to the counter which was lit by bulbs surrounding a mirror, and covered with makeup sticks, pages of script, and clothing. Stefan looked down and saw Thom under the counter, lying on the floor with his knees splayed to the side, his fingers and thumbs touching. His eyes were closed, and he hummed quietly.

"He's getting into character. Which is a bit annoying, since 'Seth' is a bastard. Either that, or he's trying to levitate."

Stefan laughed.

Chris lowered his voice. "No, seriously."

"Ah," said Stefan. "Well, could you wake whoever he is up and tell him it's places in three minutes?"

Chris flipped his hands into the air. "I'm not touching him. That essential oil he wears smells like a hamster cage."

"Okay." Stefan knelt carefully next to Thom and poked his knee. "Thom — *Seth* — it's three minutes to places." Thom gasped as if coming up from a deep-sea dive and stared at him with a possessed look. Stefan backed out of the dressing room.

"Knock, knock," said Stefan, then opened the door to Norman's dressing room. Norman sat in his dressing-gown with paper towel tucked in around the neck. His face was covered in orangey stage makeup, and his script was in his hand. But he was asleep. This happened a lot, offstage, and even onstage during an earlier rehearsal. "Norman," whispered Stefan. For a moment, he wondered if the man was dead. "Mister Wallace," he said, louder now. Norman spluttered and came to. "Two minutes to places." Norman nodded, and gathered himself together. "How are those lines coming?"

"Oh, don't worry about me, son. When you've been doing this as long as I have, memorisation is a reflex, one of the lesser skills in an actor's toolbox, really."

Stefan nodded, as if learning something important. He found that Norman liked that. For all his bluster, though, the man was clearly having trouble, and it made Stefan uneasy.

He walked down the hallway and out a fire escape into the theatre. He sat in a worn plush red seat in the middle of the house and got out his notepad. (The cast moaned now whenever he took it out in front of them.) Charlene poked her head from the wings on the left-hand side of the stage and gave Stefan a thumbs-up sign. He returned it, but whimpered to himself.

The house lights dimmed, and recorded music played — soft violins and a lone accordion. Faint amber light spilled down on the set, lighting up a street. (Though it was suggested with just two doors set in a panel and a backdrop showing a projection of row housing, streetlights, and city beyond, stretching off to a harbour.)

Heck Folward stepped from his parents' house wearing a cap and an old brown suit. He looked up at the sun, smiled, closed the door behind him, and walked down the street. Morning in the city was busy, and full of sound. Heck walked across town to the factory where he worked. The guard let Heck in when he showed his ID card. He walked through the compound to the main building, where he descended several flights of metal stairs, down to his workshop. Jets of steam made the space uncomfortably hot; he removed his cap and jacket, and rolled up his sleeves. He picked up a set of clunky parts like jumbled metal limbs from his large desk and moved them about, looking for the cause of the trouble with them. His workshop was just one of countless others. The giant machine that stretched across the city provided the citizens with everything they could possibly want, so he felt honoured being employed to help keep it running. He didn't know how the whole thing worked — no one did — but he was an expert at his small part, and had received several commendations.

Arto Hanstardath, the area leader, walked through the factory in a pinstripe suit, despite the heat. He stopped at Heck's workshop and examined the young man's work. He slapped him on the shoulder to show his approval, and moved on.

Heck walked home again, pausing only briefly at a newsagent's to look over the headlines. They were all variations of the same message: things were fine. There were problems in the world, but they were all elsewhere. Some people complained that things at home could be better, but Heck couldn't imagine how. He reached his house, looked out at the rosy sun setting over the harbour, took off his cap, and went inside.

The next day at work, Heck stabbed his hand with a tool while trying to fix a particularly difficult piece of equipment. As a valued employee, he was quickly rushed to the company infirmary across town. A beautiful nurse treated him, applying more than usual care. He asked her name. "Truna Instred," she replied. Although he was a company man, there was something different about him. She knew better, but she trusted him. "I have to show you something," she said, leading him from the ward.

Stefan watched as his mother led his father by the hand. He'd never seen her so intent on a purpose before. His father looked as if he'd follow her anywhere.

One of the footlights blew. Part of the set went dark, and a puff of smoke curled up toward the proscenium arch. Stefan blinked, and saw Chris and Serena, still hand in hand, standing, waiting to see if he wanted them to continue. Chris put a hand on his hip, and Serena looked at her watch. Stefan shook his head. "Um, take ten," he said. He left the theatre and stood outside the stage door. Two of the stage technicians were there smoking, but he didn't talk to them. Instead, he walked around the block, looking up at the monolithic office towers in the night. Streetlights reflected in their shiny black surfaces like stars on a still lake.

His father had given him more than just a play. Something unfinished waited in the lines of the story.

~

After the night's final dress rehearsal, the cast retired to a bar across the street from the theatre for their nightly notes-session. Stefan flipped through his notepad, trying to decipher what he'd written in the dark, to remember what the note was about, then to explain himself to the actors. Over the weeks of working together, they'd developed a shorthand and a series of in-jokes, so the sessions went quickly now. Stefan had learned how to communicate with each of them, and who — Serena and Norman, namely — needed extra care.

Stefan finished giving his notes, then flipped the small wire-bound book closed. "That's it," he said, dropping the book on the table, "we're ready." The cast cheered, and

Stefan jumped up to order them a round of drinks at the bar. He asked the bartender for more of what they were drinking, and turned to go back to the table. Across the bar, he saw Ming, his ex-boyfriend, sitting at a table with some friends. Stefan didn't see Michael, his replacement, but somehow knew he and Ming were still a couple. He looked back at the table, where Charlene and the actors waited for him. He smiled, and went to join them.

Chapter Nine

Voice Box

Stefan ran toward the bank. The pixelboard at the base of the giant Bay Street banking tower flashed with messages about the stock market, charities the bank supported, and reasons to switch to their services. In one corner, the time flashed, 4:55PM. This was the last business day before his flight left for Scotland. He had yet to close his account. In a world of global telecommunication, he knew he didn't really need to close the account, but he felt it was an important gesture.

He reached the large glass doors and pulled on one of the handles. He sighed with relief when it gave way. A teller looked up as he ran back and forth through the maze of poles and nylon ribbons. An illuminated arrow pointed him her way, and a small light blinked beside her. She looked unhappily at the blinking light, and moved aside the end-of-day work she'd almost finished. As he stood in front of her, she propped a smile up with her lips and asked, "How may I help you?"

"I'd like to close my account, please," Stefan replied.

The smile fell down.

"Do you have any identification?"

Stefan knew she was trying to block him, but he was prepared. He reached into his pockets and, alternating with his left and right hand, emptied credit cards, licenses, and identification badges, then finally reached into his back pocket and produced his passport. The teller sighed, and took out several forms, which she handed to him. "Sign here," she said, writing an X on the page. "And here, and here, and," she flipped forward a page, "here, here, and here." Stefan signed his name several times, his signature degrading with each successive use. He hoped she wouldn't question him about that. It was just something that happened.

"The balance," she said, "how would you like it?"

"In dimes," he joked. She didn't find it funny. "Um, a cashier's cheque would be fine." She typed some things into her computer, filed his paperwork, and shuffled some other pieces of paper around, then produced a large blue cheque for Stefan. He was pleasantly surprised about the amount printed on it in pixelated grey numbers. He'd arranged the cast's accommodations, rented the theatre, and paid the actors and Charlene for the rehearsal period, yet there was still a sizeable amount left. He didn't expect the show to make money — it was theatre after all — but he hoped that he wouldn't be completely broke when it ended.

"Thank you," he said, looking up from the cheque. But the teller was already gone. He walked from the bank out into the hot afternoon. The air was thick with exhaust from the cars and buses. He passed a hot dog vendor, and the smell lured him back to buy a veggie-dog. (Not veggie to comply with his mother's rules, but because they agreed better with him.) He sat on the edge of a marble plant-box in front of an endlessly tall copper-coloured building and ate his supper. He looked at the cheque again.

What am I going to do when the show's over? Thinking about it made him nervous. He didn't like this about life, the having to constantly think up what to do next. He'd asked his father in his first letter to save him, and the play was his answer. But the show would only run for three weeks.

Stefan finished his hot dog and dropped the tiny napkin that came with it into a nearby trash can. The traffic signals changed in his favour, and the lumbering streetcars parted like a Red Sea. He crossed the wide street, heading toward the towering broadcast building to pay a call he'd been intending to pay for several days, but had been putting off.

He signed in at security and rode the elevator up several floors. "Helen?" he said, knocking at her door. He had a good idea she would be here, as she was prone to finishing late.

"Come in," she said. "Oh, hello!" She gestured for him to sit at a chair in front of her desk. He plopped himself down. She sat back in her chair and looked at him. "So, you're leaving tomorrow. I was wondering if I'd see you."

"Of course. Though it still feels weird to think that I'm going. I find myself feeling kind of — I'm not sure."

"Nervous?"

"Well, about the show, a bit. I don't know how I'm going to lead this thing without you. But you've given me Charlene, so it's not really that. I just feel, like—"

"Like leaving is admitting defeat."

Stefan cocked his head, and tested what she'd said against his feelings. "Yeah. You know, that's it. How did you know that?"

"Wisdom is just projected experience. I'm not from here. I left someplace else once. But you know what? It worked. I like it here, and things turned out well for me." She leaned her head on one of her small arms. "Ask yourself, does it feel like you're quitting?"

"No. I'm following something. My dad, the play — everything's leading me this way."

"Well then."

"Helen, you've made such a difference in my life. I don't know how I would have done any of this without you. I put off coming here because I didn't want to say goodbye. But I couldn't very well leave without seeing you."

"Well I'm happy you didn't, because I have something I wanted to give you." She leaned forward in her custom-built executive high-chair and fished through the purse on her desk. She pulled out an envelope and handed it to him.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Open it."

He tore at the envelope, then examined the slip of paper inside, a cheque. "Oh my God," he said, "I can't take this."

"It's not for you," she said. "It's made out to The Raccoon Players. I'm not being charitable here, Stefan, I'm being subversive. This play is dangerous. I want it out there. I'm too established here; I'm not in a position to start over and try to create something like this. You brought it to me from wherever it came from, and I have to make the most of this opportunity. What do I need the money for? To buy more stuff? I don't need more stuff. And the things I do want, I can't buy. Besides, I don't know how much longer I'm going to—"

"Helen."

"No, seriously. My doctors... Anyway, my point is that I believe in what you're doing, and it's my cause now, too. Art can save the world. If we don't have art, then the fuckers in the suits win." She sat back in her chair, wearing a grave expression. Then she croaked to herself, giggling.

"Alright," said Stefan, "thank you then."

"As for you, though," she said, "there's just one thing I ask of you, and it has nothing to do with the show."

"Okay."

"Don't hurt your mother."

Stefan squirmed in his chair.

"No, I mean it. I know she drives you crazy, but she and I have worked together for a long time, and she's a good woman. She doesn't deserve your scorn. Don't you see that she's doing all these weird things because she cares about you?"

"I know. It's just—"

"Don't leave a mess. Promise?"

He sighed. He'd planned on slipping away. "Okay," he acquiesced.

"Good. Now," she said, "get out. I have work to do and I can't have you taking up my whole evening."

It was sudden, more abrupt than the goodbye he'd pictured. But he guessed this was not the first time someone left her behind. He hugged her small, lumpy body.

"Alright," she said, "get off me. Out!"

Stefan stopped at the door and waved at her. She smiled, waved, and shooed him out.

~

The bouncer's white dress shirt was stretched to its limits across his chest, illuminated by the yellow, blue, and pink neon tubes beside him, whose coloured gases burned the words "Girls, Girls, Girls". The black tie he wore was too short because of the width of the neck it had to encompass. Over his head shone an old cinema marquee, now featuring one word: *Lapland*.

The man blocked Stefan's entrance to the club.

"Um," said Stefan.

"Yeah?"

"I'm here to see the band."

The man's stern face broke into a laugh. "Yeah, and I read *Playboy* for the articles.

Ten bucks cover, pay inside."

Stefan paid at the small window and moved through the darkness, weaving his way around small tables populated by lone men, moving toward the stage, where the band talked to each other, adjusting their instruments under the spotlights.

"Rick!" said Stefan.

"Hey, you made it! Guys, this is Stefan." Rick introduced him to the other three musicians, variations on Rick's grunge musician look, with hair gelled into post-sleep nests, baggy trousers, sneakers, and loose T-shirts of various colours featuring unintelligible names of what Stefan figured were other bands or skateboarding equipment.

"Welcome to our third gig," said Rick.

"This is great."

"Yup. You're looking at an ex-window-washer."

"You got rid of the business?" asked Stefan.

"Nope. I finally took Allen's advice, and I got some students to work for me. And lots of insurance. So now I'm free to focus on my music. We've got a manager, and we've got two more bookings this month."

"Wow!"

"Yeah, and with the extra money, I'm going to take a trip to Malaysia."

"Oh, great, to meet—"

"Jennifer, yeah. I can't wait."

I wonder how she feels about that, thought Stefan, but he said "Cool."

"The bar manager's giving us the signal to start again. The audience is anxious to get to the part of the night with girls in it. The gang is over there in the back corner. I'll join you when we're finished. Oh, hey," he reached into his guitar case and pulled out a CD case, "we did a demo, too!" He handed it to Stefan. "That's an extra copy. You can keep it."

"Alright!" said Stefan. "Wow, congratulations. I'm really happy you've got all this going." He stepped off the stage and fumbled through the darkness, his night vision ruined by the stage lights. After bumping into two businessmen who didn't make eye contact when he apologised, Stefan found Allen, Paulo, and Paulo's boyfriend Adam at the back, where they were talking to a woman wearing a pair of sequinned Canadian flag panties and red tasselled pasties.

"So," the woman said to his friends, "I've only got two more biology courses to finish, and then I want to get into a good veterinary medicine program."

"That's great, Wendy," said Adam, who had a strange ability to get people to tell him their most private thoughts within minutes.

Allen stood up unsteadily and hugged Stefan. He had a deep tan and wore a white T-shirt from a recent vacation that read "The Coast is Queer". He and his partner took the trip after they'd both received promotions.

"So," asked Wendy, "would you guys like more drinks?"

"What about you," Paulo asked Stefan, "would you like a drink, or five?"

"Ooh, big spender. What's with you?"

Adam leaned forward and proudly announced that Paulo had just won a leading role in a summer stock theatre company.

"And the theatre is really close to our cottage," said Paulo. He was about to say more, but the band blared into their last set.

"How are they?" yelled Stefan.

"Actually," replied Allen at the top of his lungs, "they're pretty good!."

Stefan smiled and sat back in his chair. Wendy brought their drinks, and Stefan tried to figure out where to look as she leaned over them, tassels dangling, trying to give each of them the proper drink. The table soon became a game of alcohol chess. Her difficulty remembering their orders made Stefan worry about the animals who would be her patients one day.

He drank too quickly, and felt blissfully blurry by the time Rick joined them. An announcer spoke excitedly about each of the girls as they came on and did their themed acts. His voice, blaring over the speakers, combined with the unintelligible second voice, made Stefan feel unsteady. He couldn't hear or follow the conversation. He just watched his friends, whose lives were already moving forward without him. They loved him, he had no doubt of that, but they all knew that sooner or later their ambitions, their love-lives, or something would send them off in different directions.

Stefan found himself staring at a naked woman who wrapped herself around a pole and moved upward like a zero-gravity fire-fighter.

He stood and announced to the others that he was leaving. They hugged, and Allen followed him outside, where the air was cool and clear after the hot, clammy atmosphere inside.

"So this is it," said Allen.

"Yup," answered Stefan.

"It's not going to be the same."

"No. It's going to be different. But it'll go on without me."

They hugged for a long time, and Stefan felt Allen's chest jerking as he cried. "Oh, don't," said Stefan. But it was too late. After holding each other for several minutes more, Stefan let go. They both wiped at their faces, laughing through their tears. "Okay," said Stefan, "I'm going to go."

"Maybe we'll visit next year," said Allen. But they both knew it was a lie. His partner would never participate in a vacation that had Stefan as its destination.

"Yeah," said Stefan, participating in the lie to avoid making things worse. "So I'll see you when I see you."

"Yeah. Good luck with the play."

"Thanks. Okay, I'm going to—" he nodded away.

"Right."

"Right."

They hugged again, and Stefan walked away, turning back briefly to see that Allen had gone inside. He took a deep breath of the night air and walked across town, looking at the lights and shop-fronts along his path home, all so familiar, yet altered by his knowledge that he was leaving. He stopped as he walked by the grade school he attended for so many years, where he'd been pulled from class to be told that his father died, where the strange old music teacher was such a fan of his mother and personally congratulated him when Delonia went back on air with her own solo show. He laughed, remembering the year he started late, after his mother's failed experiment in home-schooling.

Stefan walked around the building and sat on the steps he'd burst from for a thousand recesses and many happy final days of school before summer vacation. He looked at the basketball hoops, impossibly high. He doubted that he could sink a shot now, even though he was taller — though not as tall as he'd hoped back then.

He stood, unbuttoned his baggy shorts (a birthday present the year before, ordered from a cooperative, fair-trade cotton farm), and urinated on the door of the school, giggling, walking backwards to get away from the approaching stream. He felt guilty as he buttoned up

and remembered Bill, the skinny old janitor who used to clean up after the children whenever they threw up or tracked mud through the school.

Another few blocks' walk brought him back home, where he stood in front of the house, trying to appreciate that this would be the last night he slept here.

~

Stefan looked around his room. The walls were bare, except for the empty CD racks. He'd sold his collection the week before. He sized up the two huge duffel bags he'd packed, one blue, one green. He had to get these upstairs, but he still hadn't spoken to his mother about his leaving. *Well, now or never*, he thought, and hoisted the bags, one held in front of him, one behind. He started up the stairs, but fell backward onto the green bag, the blue bag landing on top of him. He struggled back to his feet, and dragged one bag at a time up the stairs. How he was going to manage on the other end, he wasn't sure. The rest of the cast would arrive in a week, and he hadn't booked himself a place to stay.

He dragged the bags through the kitchen to the front room. He took his jacket from the coat rack and checked the inside pocket for his ticket, then dropped it on his bags. He tied up his shoes. Every little act was a delay tactic. His heart did a drum roll; he was sorely tempted to slip out the front door, but he'd promised Helen he would leave properly.

The sound of Cerise's cello resonated from the study. Stefan went to the door and knocked. "Yes?" asked Cerise from within. Stefan opened the door.

"Sorry. Do you know where my mother is?"

"She's not here," she said, not looking up from the finger she traced along the sheet music on the stand in front of her.

Stefan's heart sank. "But—"

"Stefan, do you think she wanted to be here? She *knows*."

"But how?"

"Well," she said, shifting her flowing patterned dress around the cello so she could turn and face him, "you said you were going somewhere. You've sold or thrown out all your things. You've been cagey all week. And she's a smart woman."

His mind and his feelings were jumbled. On one hand, he was upset: she'd stolen his thunder once again. On the other, he felt guilty that his plans were hurting her already. Maybe that was his original intention, but that had long passed.

Cerise put her cello to one side and picked up a small package from the old desk beside her. "She wanted you to have this."

Stefan took it from her, a small, gift-wrapped cube. "What is it?" he asked.

"She said it was a Voice Box. I have no idea what that is, but she said you're not to open it until you've had a change of heart."

"Um, okay."

A car horn sounded outside.

"Well, uh, goodbye," he said. He moved to give Cerise a kiss or a hug or whatever would seem appropriate when he got close to her. But she flipped up a hand and turned her head away. "Don't be good to me if you can't be good to her."

The taxi honked again.

"Okay," said Stefan, "goodbye." He took the box with him and, unzipping one loose corner of a duffel bag, stuffed it away. He opened the door and dragged his bags down the steps. The cabbie helped him lift them into the trunk, and they both got into the car.

As the cab pulled away, Stefan looked back at the house. The curtains in one of the upstairs windows moved, and he saw Delonia looking out. He pressed himself against the back window and waved. But the curtains closed.

The cab took him through the heart of town, then out onto the open expressway leading to the airport. He felt the gravity of the city pulling at him, but the cab was travelling fast enough to break away from it. The multicoloured glass buildings receded. The CN Tower

pointed into the sky like a giant mechanical pencil. Stefan wondered what else it might have written for him there. But it was too late for that now.

He turned and looked at the road ahead. Cars jockeyed back and forth across the lanes at high speed. The cab passed under a green highway sign with a white airplane on it. He felt dizzy. Everything he knew was back in the city he'd just left. *How did this all start?* he wondered. He'd asked his father to save him. Did this, today, make sense in that context? He reached into his trouser pocket and took out the tiny newsprint letters he'd stuck between pieces of tape. *EDINBURGH*. What did that mean? He knew practically nothing about the place. He was very clear, though, about what he was leaving.

~

Stefan washed his hands in the airport bathroom sink. He ran them through his floppy hair, then put them under the hot air dryer. The lights in the room dimmed. Stefan looked up, then around the room. From the shadows in a corner stepped a man in a wide-brimmed hat and an unseasonably long and heavy black cloak. It was the creature who'd pushed Stefan down the steps of the Matholic church.

Stefan grabbed his ticket from the counter and moved toward the door. But the thing grabbed his hand, struggling to take his ticket. Stefan pulled back with all his might. The figure was strong. His other hand shot to Stefan's throat and squeezed it hard. Stefan struggled against the grip of the two hands, flailing as he was lifted from his feet. The shadowy man slammed him into the metal doors of the cubicle.

His eyes were watering, closing, but in the mirrors he saw someone else: his father, spotlit in the middle of the room. Stefan went limp and closed his eyes. He felt the figure being pulled away from him, and he fell to the floor. Lying on the cold tile, he opened his eyes. There was no one else in the room.

Stefan picked his ticket up from the floor, grabbed the handles of his bags, and shuffled as quickly as he could from the bathroom out into the sunlight that blazed down from the slanted glass ceiling. The uniformed woman at the check-in counter was calm and polite, but Stefan could barely bring himself to speak to her, still shocked and frightened. He wanted to tell her what had happened, to have her call security, but he knew they'd find nothing.

Once he cleared customs, Stefan headed for the bar and sat in the most populated and brightly-lit area until his flight was called. He tottered down the jetway and poured himself into his seat. The woman next to him fussed with her seatbelt, took a motion sickness pill, and set out a stick of foil-wrapped gum in anticipation of pressure changes. She took the plastic film from a CD titled *Fearless Flying* and put the disk in her CD player. She turned to him and smiled, but she was clearly terrified. Stefan felt the opposite about the flight: he would be safer up in the air, away from whoever it was who wanted to stop him from leaving.

Chapter Ten

Short Run

The airport shuttle bus shuddered to a stop, and Stefan woke up. “City centre,” said the driver, rising to press a button over his head to adjust the destination sign. Stefan rubbed his face and sat up, taking a moment to understand what the man had said, since it sounded like “Sih-ee say-ah”. He felt horrible, not having slept on the airplane. Throughout the overnight flight, a pair of little boys had run up and down the aisle beside him, a baby cried at the changes in air pressure, and movies flickered on a large screen (even if he’d wanted to watch yet another combination of pretty, straight famous people fall in love despite their cute and quirky differences, he couldn’t use the headphones without being driven to distraction).

He collected his two giant duffel bags from a penned-in area at the front of the bus, lifting them with difficulty over the rails. He thanked the driver, and dragged his cargo from the bus.

His tiredness fell away as he looked at the sight before him. Slate spires and stone steeples pierced the sky like a deadly ancient jawbone. Walls opened at random intervals, revealing tiny staircases that wound away into shade. To his right, a grassy valley of a park stretched out, peopled with old couples, business lunchers, and shirtless young men lying in the sun, the whitest people he’d ever seen, drinking from cans of beer.

Stefan leaned forward and headed like a pack-mule toward the steepled Old Town. (He knew from his reading that this was what it was called, as opposed to the New Town, the newness of which predated most of Canada.) He knew there were a few hostels nearby; he would check into one and get himself established here.

He reached a small roundabout. Thinking it clear, he started to cross, when a black taxi like a scarab beetle honked at him and flew across his path. Stefan caught his breath, startled: *Wrong direction*. Carefully now, he rushed across and headed down the street, then stepped into a small opening framed in a sandstone brick wall. Through it was a tiny staircase. His bags scraped against the walls and he hoisted them, bumping along behind him. Halfway up the staircase was an improbably-situated pub; further along, a barber. He reached the top, breathless, and found a street in front of him. Its shops and restaurants were modern, set into the carved faces of stone buildings. He walked up the steep, curved street, reaching an even older street, which was cobbled and open. He dragged his gear another hundred feet, then dropped it in a heap. Before him rose a great black cathedral with a steeple like a crown of rock. He turned around, taking in as much as he could. The age, weight, and artistry of it all was more than he could comprehend. It was an exact fit with the chalk drawing he’d seen on the blackboard bathroom walls after asking for his father’s help. Never before had he felt so sure he’d done the right thing. He cried with joy, unselfconscious, though the street was packed with tourists, buskers, and countless actors passing out handbills for their shows. For the moment, he wanted nothing more than to stand still and look. Everything was so different. He felt as though his senses had been peeled.

He spent the next five hours walking around the streets, up and down tiny staircases between the buildings, each of them named So-and-So’s Close or Such-and-Such Wynd. He walked along streets that spanned bridge-like over other parts of the city, then, somehow, found himself walking under the same street, staring up at its arched black underside.

The city seemed to *move*, an endless Escher drawing whose connections he couldn’t fathom. He couldn’t find the hostel, and the streets became even more confusing when the sun sank behind the pointed tops of the city and darkness set in. Eventually, he gave up, and curled up between his bags on the landing of a deserted close.

~

Stefan dreamt about a concert, with music made from the sound of rocks knocking, grinding together. He felt himself being passed over the crowd. When he awoke, he found himself lying on the doorstep of the hostel.

~

Stefan pulled the rough sheet and the corner of his sleeping bag up around his head, but he could still hear his roommates' talking, laughing, and snorting drunkenly. None of them was over twenty-five, and Stefan found himself feeling decidedly old and cranky since he checked in the day before. Their Australian accents, with their elastic-band vowels, grated on his ears. He curled into a tighter ball, shifted sides, and made an over-loud, exasperated sigh. It went unnoticed. Half an hour later, someone turned on a radio, and Stefan finally sat up and asked them to be quiet.

"Oh, sorry mate," replied one of them in a friendly, guileless way that made Stefan hate them more. Their talk continued in whispers and laughs, but he managed to fall asleep, despite the sunlight that crept into the room.

He awoke a few hours later and couldn't fall asleep again. He tried, but knew that sleep isn't something you can try to do. He stuffed his sleeping bag into its carry-sack and put it into a metal locker. The only remaining occupant of the room was someone new, a middle-aged Japanese man. He was better-prepared for the hostel experience, wearing earplugs and a sleep-mask. While Stefan looked at him, the man passed wind loudly, without shifting or reacting in any way. Stefan cringed and left the room to wander through the hostel's narrow hallways, trying to find the kitchen.

As he entered the room, he was surprised to see the Australian boys, all very much awake, along with an equal number of young women. The boys said hello to him, and he responded by weakly flipping a *hello* hand as he shuffled to the refrigerator.

After he'd checked in the day before, he went for a stroll around the town, trying to make sense of its geometries, and failing, but happy nonetheless to walk about with his head arched back, taking in the shapes in the buildings' masonry. He'd bought groceries on the way back to the hostel, then wandered, lost, for a few hours, until he finally arrived, and sleepily stuffed the whole bag into the fridge. He opened the bag now, and found that it had been looted.

He poured himself a bowl of granola, but all that came from the box was dust. His carton of soy-milk produced a tiny dollop, not even enough to dampen the granola-dust. From the bottom of the bag, he pulled a lone strip of bacon.

Stefan looked over at the Australians, trying to see what they were eating. They laughed and talked loudly with each other, and he resented them. He felt old and lonely.

He dumped the remains of his food into the rubbish bin, then went back to the dorm to collect his jacket and day-pack. The older man was snoring now. Stefan looked forward to the cast's arriving in a week's time. Then he'd be staying with them in the comfort of a hotel.

Thoughts of the cast reminded him of the advance work he had to do for the show. *But first, he thought, breakfast.*

He found his way to a curved, sloping street, unsure if it was the same one he'd been down before, until he saw that all the shops were different, and the street's angle was reversed. Partway down, he walked into a cloud of pungent air outside a shop's door. He turned to see that the shop was a cheesemonger's. He laughed to himself at the word "cheesemonger", and went inside. He decided that ten-thirty was late enough for lunch, and bought himself an assortment of sweet and savoury cheeses, olives, and sun-dried tomatoes, which the young man in the shop wrapped up in plastic tubs and paper for him. As the man spoke the total for the purchase, Stefan got lost in his voice. The words "Four fifty-three" had never sounded so pretty, with the flourish of a twirled R and a long, soft E in "three". He found his throat and tongue moving in an attempt to silently replicate the sound himself. *Three. Four fifty-three.*

"Oh, sorry," said Stefan, digging into his pocket for money, finding the sound of his own voice harsh by comparison. The young clerk was tall, with dark, curly hair and a pale, handsome face, his cheeks shot through with colour. Stefan wanted the exchange to go on longer, for the clerk to ask him where he was from — anything. He imagined telling his friends back in Toronto how he'd met this man, one of the first people he dealt with in Scotland. "I've only got a tenner," said Stefan, proud of himself for knowing the term.

"At's alright," said the clerk, taking it. He counted out change, and placed it in Stefan's palm, the five-pound note first, then the change on top of that. Stefan didn't even get to feel the man's fingertips. It was just a cheese transaction.

"Thanks," said Stefan, hesitating, then waving as he turned away.

"Thank you," said the cheesemonger-clerk. *Yuu*, repeated Stefan to himself.

He walked back up the street to a cemetery, where he wandered between the blackened headstones and monuments with their carved cherub faces and skulls-and-crossbones. The low wall of one family grave seemed inviting, with an overhanging tree. Stefan sat and admired the pair of angels carved into the space above the family's names, though their faces were worn away by the elements. He unwrapped his lunch and ate, listening closely when he thought he heard a choir singing. He assumed that the voices came from the church on the cemetery grounds. He heard faint words, but they sounded like nonsense. Delonia and Robert never took him to church, so he figured it was probably another of those traditional things he didn't understand.

Lifting his head as he put a corner of a sweet, white cheese into his mouth, he noticed a grim-looking gargoyle on the corner of a nearby mausoleum. He wondered why anyone would carve something like that into their family's grave-site. The cheese dropped from his hand and landed in the grass at his feet. He picked it up, blew on it, looked around, and popped it into his mouth. When he raised his head again, the gargoyle was gone. The stone was smooth, mossy, and black, featureless where a moment before he was sure he'd seen a detailed carving. He looked back at the pair of angels. They were still there. But the choral singing stopped.

~

Stefan stepped into the office of the Fringe Society, who were responsible for running the Edinburgh Fringe theatre festival. He wished Helen was with him to do this kind of front-line co-ordination. He said hello to the young woman working the desk. It wasn't worthwhile explaining much to the first person he spoke to, he knew that. Usually one had to be handed around a bit before reaching someone who could help. In this case, he was given to the right person in just one hand-off.

The receptionist introduced Stefan to another woman. He liked something about her. She looked comfortable in her soft, casual clothes, yet strong and decisive, as if every piece of clothing she wore, down to her coloured metal earrings and the bangles on her wrist, was chosen for expressive reasons, or given to her by a real person who'd made them. She had the unshakable gravity of long-term exposure to the arts, with all the independent thought that entailed, along with the strength of surviving the constant struggle in a marketplace that questioned if her work was necessary at all.

"My name's Stefan Mackechnie, and I've got a show in the Fringe this year."

"Oh yes," she said. Saying it made him feel important, but the woman reacted as if he'd informed her that he breathed air.

"I was just wondering—" he stammered. *Why am I here?* he asked himself. Everything had already been arranged from Canada. "Well, I just wanted to make sure that I've done everything I needed to do."

"You've paid your fee to the society?" she asked.

"Yep."

"You've given us your details for the programme?"

“Uh-huh.”

“Have you arranged your venue?”

“Yes, we’ve done that. We found a great space and paid them for the run of the show, and we’re selling tickets through the Fringe box office. It’s an evening show.” Neither the advance organisation nor the plum position of the show impressed her. Of course it didn’t. She was friendly enough, but he had to remind himself that her organisation dealt with a thousand such theatre companies each year.

“And do you have accommodation for the cast?” she asked.

“Yeah, we’re booked into a hotel in the city centre.” Was it called “*the* city centre”, he wondered, or just “city centre”? He wasn’t used to sticking out so much every time he spoke. He’d yet to hear any one accent for long enough to be able to duplicate it.

“Well,” said the woman, “it sounds like you’re all ready.” She turned up her palms in an *all done* gesture. “Congratulations.” Stefan smiled, feeling like he’d passed a test. “Now you just have to do your promotions.” *Oh yes, that*, he thought. “What’s your show called? I’ll keep an eye open for it.”

“It’s called *Empire of Nothing*,” said Stefan, proudly.

“I’ve not heard about that one.”

“You will,” he said, giving a cocky wink as he shook her hand and left. He wondered if that was too much, too brashly North American. Of course, he figured, everyone must think their own show is something special. But how many of those involved spiritual intervention? He wondered if that would make any difference to ticket sales. The company stood little chance of breaking even, since the venue cost more per seat than the ticket price they were asking, plus they had to pay for the cast, the posters and handbills, the accommodations, and — Stefan stopped thinking about it. He’d resigned himself to being broke by the end of the run; there was no point thinking about it now. Things would work out, he figured, because they had to.

~

Stefan approached the bar and looked at the draught taps with the various names on them. Some sported numbers — 70, 80 — and he had no idea what that meant. The bar maid asked him what he wanted. “What do these numbers mean?” he asked.

“The numbers?” she asked. *Numbas*. Australian. He could count the number of Scottish people he’d met on one hand. “Oh those.” *Thoyse*. “Those refer to the duty that they used to collect on the different kinds of beer.” *Beeya*. “The higher the number, the stronger the beer.”

“Oh,” he replied. “I’ll try an eighty.”

“An eighty shilling. Alright.” She took a pint glass and pulled down hard on the draught-tap, as if she were juicing oranges. Something about that, along with the pub’s dark wooden interior, struck him as authentic.

He paid for the pint and walked deeper into the pub. People sat in groups around tables. Smoke rose from some of them like clouds of geothermal steam. Stefan dodged these, and found a stool beside a thin ledge and perched there. He enjoyed watching the people, but had no idea what to do with himself. He sipped his beer, finding it quite similar to the various ‘red’ and ‘dark’ ales sold in Canada. Smoking wasn’t permitted in Canadian bars anymore. Sitting uselessly on the stool, he vaguely understood the urge to smoke, to have something, anything, to do. He paid attention to his drink instead, as if he had some kind of ability to discern anything about the musky liquid.

He’d already tried that evening to find the gay scene. He’d read about a part of town called “The Pink Triangle”, but it eluded him. *More of a Bermuda Triangle*, he thought. He wouldn’t know what to do if he did find it, but hoped that its denizens might recognise him and take him in. *If only*, he wished, *there was something like a Masonic handshake for homos*. He winced, imagining what it might look like.

With no pretext for speaking to anyone, he gave up, finishing his drink then walking back to the hostel to work on his media campaign for the show. He went to his room and lay in bed, trying to come up with something original and clever that would catch the press' attention. He was distracted by the Japanese man's constant fiddling with a small, green plastic radio. When he settled on a station, Stefan sat up in bed. The voice he'd heard for so long was no longer in the background. It upstaged the DJ's voice. It was still disjointed, but bits and pieces came through, louder and clearer than ever before. The sound was comforting, and Stefan soon fell asleep.

~

Stefan shifted his weight in an attempt to get comfortable on his plastic chair in the tiny theatre space. He looked over the programme, a single yellow sheet folded in half, but the house lights went down before he could finish reading it. What he read — the performer's name, other shows he'd been in, the director and crew — meant nothing to him anyway. Stefan stole a look around at the others in the dark. They all seemed to fit a common demographic profile: male, early thirties but dressed younger, probably gay. Stefan wasn't surprised, since the show's poster featured a young man, his shirtless torso sharing equal focus with his rosy young face. The show's title was written in distressed type beneath the photo: *Dirty Little Hoe*. A sense of guilt flooded over Stefan: he had no idea what the show was about, or any artistic grounds for being here, he just wanted to gawk at the talent. Was he a voyeur? Had it come to the point that he had to pay to see pretty people? The previous night he'd gone to see a musical version of *Titus Andronicus* because of another poster featuring two handsome young male cast members (and a third, a girl, who he supposed was pretty enough). The production featured no one over twenty-three, with liberal applications of white greasepaint to hair when they needed to indicate age. The show gave Stefan nostalgic feelings for his high school drama attempts. But when Titus' daughter sang a tongueless solo in the third act (topping the second act's dance number featuring several beheadings), Stefan slipped out of the theatre. But here he was again, following the same questionable instincts into a theatre.

The stage lights came up, with a spotlight focused on a garden hoe. Cacophonous music played over loudspeakers, and a voice chanted poetry Stefan couldn't understand. A young man walked onstage, naked. He wasn't as handsome as he appeared on the poster, and his skinniness made him look too young to be appearing this way in public.

The young man stepped on the garden hoe and took a fake hit in the face. He yelled at the hoe, then embraced it, sang a lullaby to it, and waltzed with it. After a few minutes, Stefan found the young man's nudity normal, factory equipment, no more sexual than seeing himself in the mirror after a shower. *Is that the point?* he wondered. He wasn't sure. After another twenty-five minutes of disjointed poetry and movement, he was no closer to an answer. He was intrigued, and enjoyed questioning his own thoughts and reactions — a separate show in his head — but walked out into the afternoon light afterward with no idea what the show's creators had intended. He lingered around the theatre, hoping to 'accidentally' encounter the young performer. He tried to imagine flirty lines ("Oh, you rake!") to distinguish himself as fascinating and unique, but gave up when his guilt about theatre-as-porn returned. He walked back to the hostel to pack his bags, spending fifteen minutes locked in the bathroom, fantasising about being a garden implement.

~

Stefan held up a card that he'd labelled in fat magic marker "The Raccoon Players". One by one, the cast members walked into the baggage area and smiled when they saw him. Chris was first, towing a fuzzy blue suitcase with Dalmatian spots on it. He dropped the handle and moved in slow-motion toward Stefan as if running to his lover across a field. Stefan smiled and hugged him.

Charlene pulled a very big suitcase, likely containing a few things for herself and lots more for everyone else, prepared for any possible contingency. Any cuts, scrapes, or pains during rehearsal were usually remedied by her pulling something, magician-like, from her purse.

Thom carried a Guatemalan print sack over his shoulder and pulled Serena's expensive black leather suitcase while she walked on ahead. Behind them, Maria politely listened to Norman, tugging on her baby blue suitcase while he struggled with his old tweed one. Stefan wasn't sure in this circumstance whom he should help, but everyone reached him before he could decide. They all hugged him, except Serena, who kissed him on the cheeks, and Norman, who shook Stefan's hand between both of his. Stefan was glad to see them.

"Okay," he said, addressing them, we'll get the airport bus back to city centre, then get settled into the hotel."

"We need to do an Italian," said Serena.

"An—?"

"Italian," said Thom. "Everyone says their lines really fast, without any emotion or movement."

"Right," confirmed Serena, "since it's been two weeks and we need to make sure *everyone*—" she nodded her head at Norman — "knows their lines." The gesture wasn't lost on him, or any of the other company members, who were all too familiar with his endless calls of "Line!" during rehearsals.

"Why don't we do an Italian tonight after supper?" suggested Charlene. Stefan wanted to kiss her. She had a way of defusing these power struggles as they formed. She never undermined Stefan's authority, but he knew the cast relied on her to maintain order. He had no problems with that.

"Right," said Stefan, "so that's the plan." He led them out of the airport to the glass walkway where the bus stopped. "Just wait until you see this city."

~

"Then let them tear the—" bellowed Norman. Then he went silent, and looked up toward the lighting grid. He shook his head. "Line!" he called.

The other actors, onstage and off, sighed. Serena, who'd been in the scene with him, dropped out of character with an audible 'tsk' sound, and stomped off to her dressing room. "Take five!" called Stefan. He walked down the theatre aisle to the stage. "Norman, can I talk to you for a second?"

"I'm sorry" said the actor, following Stefan to the quiet of the fire exit.

"Mister Wallace, far be it from me to comment on your process as an actor. But it's been three days since you arrived, and we've been doing Italians every day. And that line, every time we get to that line... Frankly, I'm starting to get worried, and I think it might be shaking the other cast members' confidence." The truth was that each of them had spoken to Stefan, but until now he'd hoped the situation would remedy itself.

"Don't worry, my boy, it will be there on the night."

"Mister Wallace, this *is* the night. The public dress rehearsal is in a couple of hours. You can't—"

"Mark my words, boy, public performance is the true test of an actor. And I shall pass that test."

"Okay," said Stefan, exasperated. He wondered how Helen could have recommended the man, but he had no alternative at this point but to hope he would make good on his promise. "Just see what you can do to help out the others." Stefan knew this would get him.

"Yes, the company. I will do my best to prove the stuff that makes a real actor."

"Thank you," said Stefan, going back into the theatre, jumping onto the stage, and heading off into the wings, toward the dressing rooms. He had to speak to Serena, but dreaded it.

Thom sat cross-legged on a table in the hallway, his eyes closed, breathing. “What are you doing?” asked Stefan. Thom’s rituals varied from moment to moment, and Stefan found something compelling about them. If Thom ever had a real supernatural experience, he would be much better suited to handling it than Stefan was.

“I’m trying to channel your father, to get insight into my character.”

“Oh God,” said Stefan, “don’t do that.”

Thom opened his eyes. “Why?”

“Because he might actually show up, and then all hell will break loose.”

“Has that ever happened?”

Stefan rubbed his face. “I’ll tell you about it some other time. For now, just don’t put out any—” he wiggled his fingers in the air “—signals.” He moved down the hall to the women’s dressing room, taking a deep breath before knocking on the door.

Maria answered. “Hi,” she said, opening the door a crack.

“Hi,” said Stefan. “Mind if I come in?”

“Well, I’m wearing my... *costume*,” she replied, holding a hand over her chest as she opened the door further. “I just feel, I mean, I’m not sure if it’s—”

“If it’s right for me to see you like this? Maria, I’m not going to make a pass at you.”

“I know, I know. It’s just that it’s different when I’m in character. But when I’m just me, I feel funny being dressed like this.” She laughed at herself, and covered her face with her hand. “You must think I’m really silly.”

“No,” said Stefan. “Well, I mean, I don’t get the things you believe in, but I respect your beliefs. I know it can’t be easy to always do what you feel is right, living in a — well, let’s face it, a modern world where these things don’t fit so well.”

“But they’re not irrelevant, if that’s what you’re saying. They’re more necessary than ever, because we don’t believe in *anything*, so there’s no central vision for our society to gather around. How can we progress when we can’t even agree on what progress is? How can we protect what’s most important about us when we don’t even respect it ourselves? I think that’s exactly what your father’s play is about.”

Stefan stared at her.

“‘Bible Girl’, right? That’s how you thought of me. I must be really simple, right?”

“Well, uh, I have to admit—”

“It’s alright. I’m used to it. But there’s more to me than you give me credit for.”

“Apparently.” He felt embarrassed, but decided to respond to the level of honesty she’d established. “Okay, but here we are in this incredible place, and the last two nights you haven’t come with us when we’ve gone out. Do you really think your creator would put you into this world just to ignore it and hide in a hotel room?”

She closed the dressing room door behind her, and stepped out into the hall. They both knew Serena was steaming at her makeup mirror, but there was something more: Maria didn’t want to be overheard.

“I’ve never been away from home before on my own. I’ve always travelled with my parents. I’m twenty-two. I know that’s not normal. So this is a bit shocking. I still believe what I believe, but—” She leaned close to him and whispered. “I think I like Thom.”

“I like him, too. He’s a bit weird, but he’s a good guy.”

“No, I *like him* like him.”

“Oh.”

“Do you think—?”

“God knows,” said Stefan. “Good idea: perhaps you can ask Him,” he said, laughing. “I have to go sort out this Serena thing.”

“Oh screw her,” said Maria. She covered her mouth and giggled. “Sorry. But it’s true. Stop giving her what she wants all the time. It’s your show.”

Stefan smiled. He liked the advice, if for no reason than that it saved him having to receive another tongue-lashing from his employee. “Come out with us tonight,” said Stefan.

“I just might do that,” said Maria.

~

The rest of the afternoon passed uneventfully, as the cast did a “cue-to-cue” walkthrough, in which the technician working with Charlene ran through the lighting and sound cues. Norman used his script, which did nothing to alleviate Stefan’s nerves, but prevented any new conflicts.

Stefan sat down beside Charlene in the lighting booth, a glassed-in room at the back of the theatre, where she listened to the proceedings onstage through a headset. “Go LX 47, stand by Sound 20,” said Charlene to the technician, a tall man with long, wavy black hair and a beard, whose age Stefan couldn’t determine. “Go LX 48, go Sound 20.”

“So do we have any idea how many people are coming tonight?” Stefan asked Charlene.

Charlene flipped a page in her giant binder, a copy of the script, only four times the usual width and filled with coloured annotations and stickers. “Stand by Sound 21. Cross-fade to LX 48, count of five.” She turned to Stefan and said, “Six.”

“Six?”

“Six. We have an audience of six. Go Sound 21.”

“Okay,” said Stefan, standing to leave the booth.

“But two of them are major reviewers.”

“Oh.”

“No pressure.”

“No,” said Stefan. “But let’s not tell the cast.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

~

Stefan sat at the back of the theatre. He looked over the other seats, and could count thirty other heads. They’d all been given free tickets. Actually, he thought, they’d given out a hundred and fifty free tickets. But only thirty people showed. This had never occurred to him, that the show might go completely unnoticed. The house lights dimmed. Stefan clutched his clipboard, though at this point there was little that taking notes could do. Thirty people was nothing in the two-hundred-and-fifty-seat theatre, but the pressure was on: it was a real show. The fate of the play hung on the opinions of two of these thirty people. He hadn’t told the cast, but they all knew that the final dress was the logical time to invite reviewers.

The stage lights rose on the backdrop of row housing, then the two doors at the front of the stage. Chris stepped from the door, and Stefan smiled: he was a solid actor, inspired even. No longer an echo of his father, the character of Heck had become someone new, built from Chris’ physiology and the creative work they’d done in rehearsal together. Stefan liked watching Chris on stage, and felt compelled by the life of the character. Serena seemed a bit plastic next to him, but Chris made her look better than she was.

The first act went well. Stefan split his attention between the actors’ work onstage and the body language of the few audience members. They seemed interested, or at least their heads weren’t nodding off to sleep. One even leaned forward in his seat.

The second act was solid. All the technical elements were in place, and the performances were going well. The lights cross-faded, revealing the factory set. *Oh God*, thought Stefan, *that scene*.

Norman-as-Arto entered, looking for his daughter. Stefan had been amazed at the change in Norman during the evening’s performance. His bellowing gave way to subtle nuances of inflection and tone. He’d transformed from a stand-in to a living, breathing person from the story. *He wasn’t trying in rehearsals*, thought Stefan. But this was “the scene”, and the line approached. Serena-Truna found Norman-Arto, collapsed against a piece of machinery. Stefan saw the tension in Serena’s movement.

"Father," she said, "it's over. They're *tearing... the... city... down*," she enunciated, setting up his response for him.

Norman paused. Or was it the character, Arto? A full two seconds passed as he looked at her, with contempt in his eyes. He spoke slowly, seething with calm gravity. "*Then let them tear the city down.*"

Serena looked at him. She said nothing. She blinked. She looked around, frantically. She smoothed down the creases in her dress, and touched her hair. Her mouth opened, cocked like the hammer of a gun, but her voice fired a blank: "Uh."

Her hand flew to her face. "I'm sorry, I've never done this before. I can't remem—" She looked into the theatre. "Line!" she called. But Charlene wasn't in the house, as she had been in rehearsals. She was in a glass booth at the back of the theatre. Norman stood, resolute, as Serena floundered.

Stefan sat up in his seat, then scurried, hunched over, toward the stage. "Tomorrow!" he whispered, as he huddled by the front row. "*Tomorrow!*" But Serena was paralysed.

Charlene finally lowered the stage lights, a professional act of compassion. She brought the house lights up, and the audience sat, confused, for a moment, then turned their heads, looking for an explanation. Stefan stood. "Uh, sorry, we've had a bit of a problem, he said. We'll, um, we'll start the show again in ten minutes. Thanks for your patience."

He gestured to the booth, waving for Charlene to go backstage. He jumped up on the stage, joining Norman. But Serena was gone. "Where did she go?" asked Stefan.

"She ran off," he said, calmly. "I imagine she'll be running home."

"You set her up," said Stefan, roughly guiding Norman offstage.

"She set herself up," replied Norman. "No one is ever important enough to act like that. I acted at Stratford. I had a television program. Who was she to question my professionalism or my ability?"

"I'll deal with you later," said Stefan. The cast gathered backstage, and Charlene ran in from the booth. Stefan addressed them all: "Okay, everyone, gather 'round. Here's what we're going to do. There are ten minutes left in the show. I'm going to stand in as Truna. Maria, do me up."

"You're kidding, right?" asked Thom.

"No, I'm not. We have to finish the show. There are reviewers out there."

"Oh crap," said Chris. "Okay, come to my dressing room. I'll get you ready."

"But I need to be made up as a woman."

Chris rolled his eyes. "Excuse me, Herr Director, I think I know a little bit more about drag than Maria does."

They ran to Chris's dressing room, where Chris smeared and dabbed at Stefan's face. Maria and Charlene brought in some of Serena's costumes. "Charlene, go back to the booth," said Stefan, "and — what?" Charlene was laughing. Stefan looked at himself in the mirror. The heat of the lightbulbs made the makeup feel greasy and heavy. But Chris had succeeded in making him look as female as possible. He was an ugly woman. He squished himself into the loosest of Serena's costumes, his slight belly bisected by the waistline. He looked at himself in the mirror again. "Oh no. Okay, okay, Charlene, go back to the booth and cue up scene forty-seven again. Everyone, places!"

But when they went back to their places, they saw that half the audience was gone. They resumed the show, with Stefan speaking Serena's lines from memory. He duplicated her voice perfectly, and tried to mimic her gestures slightly, trying hard not to be camp, but the remaining audience members snickered anyway. Several ducked down and scuttled out of the theatre. Those who stayed laughed harder and harder, and clapped when Chris and Stefan shared a kiss.

The actors ran offstage after the last scene, and Stefan realised he hadn't devised a curtain-call. He waved the others onstage to take a bow with him. There was no sound cue, so they gathered in silence. By the time they assembled and the lights came back up, they looked out at an empty theatre.

~

“So you get to play the nice girl after all,” said Chris, poking Maria in the ribs.

“But what am I going to do with these?” she asked, squishing her breasts together. Chris’s jaw dropped in earnest, and he had no comeback, which everyone in the rehearsal appreciated as a first, except for the new actress, Tamara, who was assuming Maria’s old part, while Maria moved up to fill Serena’s. The process of re-casting was a hasty one, co-ordinated with the help of the festival’s office, who let them know about an English show that had collapsed before opening. Stefan was determined not to let that happen to his father’s show, and after a brief lunch with the actress, Stefan and Charlene made her an offer. The more he thought about the decision, the happier Stefan was with it. Tamara was tall, and her figure was broad. She was not a typical beauty, but she knew how to be who she was. She turned heads when she walked into a room, and had the confidence and personality to keep them interested. Maria had acted her role as the temptress well, but now, as Truna, Maria could be onstage without acting, which seemed to Stefan like a much better idea. The dynamic of the show was different now, and for the better.

Tuesday night, after their failed public dress rehearsal, the cast, including Maria, went out on the town and got drunk together. They pored over the newspapers the next day, relieved to find they weren’t mentioned, yet aware that they’d missed their chance for advance press. When they staggered back to the hotel, they discovered with no surprise that Serena and her things were gone.

Now, though, they were excited again. Though changes and last-minute rehearsals should have been disruptive, the cast laughed and joked, staying in the theatre for scenes they weren’t in, just to watch. Something was happening, and they were part of it. Tamara was a quick study, and the other actors ran lines with her every spare moment. Norman took a shine to her, even though she’d never heard of him. She respected him, and that was enough. After an hour’s coaching from Stefan, she managed to match her accent with the rest of the cast’s.

By late Thursday afternoon, they’d worked through the whole play. They were ready to open the next night. The only thing left to rehearse was the new curtain-call. The actors stood around Stefan on the stage as he paced back and forth. “Umm,” he said, tapping a pen against the palm of his hand. “Got it!” he said, unintentionally flipping the pen into the wings. He ran into the theatre and rummaged through his bag. He took out the demo disk Rick gave him his last night in Toronto and lunched up to the booth. “Put this on. Track four,” he said to Charlene, then ran back out and down to the stage. A song played through the theatre, slow and melodic. Stefan gestured to the actors, co-ordinating their movements. He held up a *wait* hand, then pointed at them, just as the music burst into a driving anthem. They bowed, and Stefan felt a tingle up his spine.

~

“Stefan,” said Charlene, “have you seen my call-book?”

“Very funny,” he said, smirking at her.

“No, seriously.”

“I didn’t take it. It’s got to be in the booth somewhere.”

“I checked,” she said.

“What about—? Um, the technician.”

“Brian.”

“Yeah, Brian. Maybe he has it.”

“Already asked him.”

Stefan shook his head. “I have no idea.”

“Stefan, it’s a half hour until curtains up.” She pointed at the manacle-like watch that circled her large wrist.

"I realise that. Okay, let me check backstage." He started out of the booth, then turned back. "The operation you had. What was it for?"

"What? I had a mastectomy."

"Oh," said Stefan. "Really? Wow. A mastectomy. But you're okay now?"

"Yeah. Three years, total remission. Perfectly healthy."

"Alright. I'm glad. Sorry for asking."

"It's okay. Go find my call-book."

"Right."

Stefan ran backstage. He knocked on the men's dressing-room door. Chris answered the door, naked. "Hi, have you—?" Stefan looked down at Chris's body. "Oh. Um. Anyway, have you seen Charlene's call-book?"

"No, God, none of us would dare to touch it. Why?"

"What's up?" asked Thom, also naked.

"What is this?" asked Stefan.

"It's a pre-show thing," said Chris.

"You guys aren't—?"

"No," said Thom.

"He likes Maria."

"Really?" asked Stefan. "That's handy, because she likes you, too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. So neither of you guys has seen the call-book?"

"No," said Thom. "Is there a problem?"

"No," said Stefan, realising he shouldn't panic his cast. "Everything's fine. Just get back to your—" he waved a finger at their bodies.

"We're getting into our characters, layer by layer," said Chris.

"Right, well, get back to it. Break a leg," said Stefan, leaving the room. He knew the women didn't have the book, either, but headed toward their room.

Before he got there, Tamara popped out of the door. "Stefan, have you seen my script?"

Stefan stopped in his tracks.

"What?" asked Tamara.

"Nothing. Sorry, I haven't seen your script. But you don't need it. You're fine." He started to back down the hall. "Everyone loves you, you'll be great. Break a leg. Excuse me." He ran toward the 'Way Out' sign at the end of the hall. The door hissed shut as he reached it. He shoved it open and looked out into the cobbled alleyway.

A dark figure scurried down the alley, wearing a long cloak and a wide-brimmed hat. Cold water shot through Stefan's veins, but he ran after the figure without hesitating: *No one is going to mess with my show.* The creature looked over its shoulder, and Stefan got a glimpse of the armful of scripts and the call-book binder he carried. Stefan sprinted after the thing, who seemed unable to move quickly. Within a few sprinting steps, Stefan reached him, and grabbed his coat with both hands. The unseasonably thick wool was greasy to his touch, but he had enough of a grip to spin the figure around and pin him against a brick wall, directly under a swath of sunlight. The man dropped the stolen goods, and his face, mostly obscured by a large scarf, twisted back and forth in the light. His eyes squeezed shut. Stefan stared at his skin, which was as colourless as newspaper. That paper, though, bore faint marks like hasty algebra problems scratched into the margins of a maths textbook in pencil then erased. The problems shifted as Stefan looked at them, the scratchings seeming to solve themselves.

The scratchman pushed back against Stefan, hurling Stefan into the opposite wall, and ran away empty-handed.

Stefan gave flowers to each of the cast members along with a personalised note, thanking them for their work on the show. Then he left them to do their preparations for the opening.

Though he knew he wasn't allowed up there, he felt compelled to climb the ladder to the catwalk over the stage. He sat beside the pin-rail, where the show's backdrops were tied with thick ropes. He dangled his legs over the ledge and sighed. From time to time, he had moments of wondering where he was, how he'd got there. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the crinkled strips of tape, between which were the tiny letters that spelled out "Edinburgh".

Stefan looked up from his hands and saw his father sitting beside him. His body jumped reflexively with fright, but his father's smile soon calmed him down.

"Hi, Dad," said Stefan.

Robert nodded his hello.

"So here we are, opening night."

Robert's smile broadened, and he nodded again.

"It was touch-and-go there for a bit," said Stefan, "but I have a funny feeling that this is going to work." He turned to his father. "This show is going to do something, isn't it? And the Matholics don't want it to happen."

Robert tried to speak, but couldn't. His look implied that what Stefan said was only partly correct.

"What do they think is going to happen?"

Robert pointed at the letters in Stefan's hand, then made a gesture with his hands like a magician causing something to disappear. Stefan was confused.

He heard the sound of someone climbing up the metal rungs to the catwalk. Brian, the technician, poked his head up. "Hey there, Stefan," he said. "What are you doing up here."

"I was just—" he looked to his side, not surprised that his father was gone. "I was just chilling out before the show."

"You shouldn't really be up here."

"No problem," said Stefan, getting to his feet. He and Brian awkwardly traded places on the narrow catwalk, and Stefan started down the ladder. "I've got to go eat and get changed before the show anyway. Hey, break a leg, man." He climbed away, embarrassed at his attempt at macho-buddy talk with the burly stagehand.

"Yeah, you, too," replied Brian from above.

~

Stefan curled and uncurled the programme in his hands, then looked at it briefly, but was all too aware of every detail he'd approved. He stuck the programme under his leg and adjusted his tie. All afternoon, the cast had wandered up and down the Royal Mile, the cobbled main street of the Old Town, giving out complimentary tickets in their costumes amid throngs of other actors, mimes, fire-eaters, and vendors who competed for the tourists' attention. He guessed they had a crowd of a hundred people, which made him happy.

The house lights dimmed, and the pre-show music started. He imagined the cast backstage, scrunched his eyes shut, and wished them luck. Stefan could faintly see the set once his eyes adjusted to the dark. He sat on his hands to keep them from shaking. His mouth was dry and sour.

The stage lights came up on the row-housing, then the front door, and the rest of the world disappeared.

The lemon colour of morning light suffused everything. Heck Folward left the house that morning, the same as he'd done each day since securing a job at the factory. He didn't know this week would mark the end of the world as he knew it.

Monday was an average day. He worked to maintain the machine, and had even received a commendation from the area leader, Arto Hanstardath. He walked home at the end of his shift, stopping to read the headlines at the newsstand on the corner: everything was fine. His best friend, Seth Weevlin, called on him in the evening, and they went out to shoot pool. Seth was a company man, working high above the streets in an office. Both of their jobs were important in different ways, so they couldn't afford to be out late.

Tuesday, Heck hurt his hand at work, and met Truna Instred, the nurse who treated him, and risked taking him to the abandoned warehouse where the underground met. There they showed him what the machine he maintained actually did, and warned him of the coming war.

Their machine-city required their endless work to maintain. He knew this, and had accepted it as a good, worthwhile occupation, since in return the machine provided everything they needed. But no one had ever told him of the unspeakable cruelties the machine did in order to bestow that providence. And no one had ever told him that there were other machines.

And now his machine was going to war with the others...

The house lights came up for the intermission. Stefan sat still for a minute, dazed, as did everyone else in the theatre before gradually coming to an awareness of their surroundings. He felt as if he'd been dreaming of his mother and father in a fairytale, only it seemed so real.

He went to the lobby to listen in on what people had to say. Many were quiet, a few talked excitedly, saying they'd never experienced anything like it, and the remainder compared notes, as if trying to confirm that they'd been watching the same show. When the lights in the lobby flashed to signal the end of intermission, everyone quickly headed back into the theatre, including Stefan, although he already knew the show as well as anyone.

...Truna discovered Arto there, leaning against a piece of machinery. "Father, it's over. They're tearing the city apart."

The man slid to the floor and spat blood as he spoke. "Then let them tear the city apart."

Heck found them, and looked at Arto, on the ground. "We have killed the old God," he said, "and our attempt to build a new one has failed. We have created a Moloch, and it is devouring us."

"What will you do now?" Arto asked them. "You, who have never made a true decision in your lives? How will you eat?"

"We will eat things now that are not poison to us," said Truna.

"How will you fill your days?"

"We will fill our days with each other. We will no longer be insane. We will wear our names, instead of the insignia of the machine. We will tear the machine from our city!"

The lovers left the man and walked out into the street, where a new day was breaking. They kissed, as an explosion sounded deep in the city. "The world belongs to us," said Heck.

Stefan found himself on his feet as the house lights came up, his fist in the air. He shook his head and watched as the curtain-call song played and the audience cheered. As the actors came onstage, the roar of the crowd intensified to a pitch that the theatre could not contain. The audience members whistled and hollered their gratitude. Some stamped their feet or banged on the theatre seats. A chant started in the crowd: "The world belongs to us". It grew in intensity, as others took it up. Soon, the whole theatre boomed with the sound of their voices. The audience members burst out into the street, where they rioted until dawn.

The next day's headlines, which the cast read together in the hotel, talked about the show and the resulting commotion, trying to piece it together from the descriptions of those who'd been there. By the time the cast went to the theatre that night, the show was sold out. Half a dozen police stood in front of the theatre in their fluorescent yellow jackets, along with a policeman and a policewoman on horseback. The show was even more powerful the second time, and the crowd of two hundred and fifty soon got away from the police and wreaked havoc on the town, though none of the local businesses suffered damage. By the end of the

show's first week, businesses reported that staff members were staying away inexplicably. At first there was concern about a mass illness, but soon the effect was traced back to a Fringe Festival show called *Empire of Nothing*. Articles appeared in the more conservative papers, accusing the show of being an anarchistic, dangerous, proletariat rant. But any suggestion that it should be closed met with suspicion, and served only to boost ticket sales. Groups camped out in the grassy fields of The Meadows after the shows, carrying on the spirit, and local radio stations played Rick's song every hour. Stefan asked Charlene to make some rapid phone calls to Rick, and the band was soon receiving residuals for the airplay. The disk jockeys expressed surprise and not a small amount of joy that the song shoved the latest tone-deaf boy-star from the charts.

~

"Fifteen minutes to — oh my God." Stefan stopped in his tracks, gawking at the sight of Maria and Thom intertwined against the dressing room table. He pointed at the door. "I, um — Fifteen minutes."

"Shouldn't be a problem," said Maria. Thom slapped her on the backside.

Stefan went to the lighting booth. "Closing night, eh?"

"Can you believe it?" she asked.

"No," he replied. He unfolded and folded a letter in his hands. "Could you have everyone assemble onstage just before curtains-up, please? There's something I need to talk to everyone about."

"Sure."

"Thanks," said Stefan, heading for the stage. Ten minutes later, he was surrounded by the cast. "So this is our last show. It's been quite a ride, and I think it's going to be a long time before the ruckus dies down from what we've presented here. I know my dad is — would be — proud of how you've brought his ideas to life, and the difference you've made. There are some people who don't like it, but then, they don't want you to do a lot of things that might be in your best interest and not theirs. I imagine closing a show is always a mixed bag of feelings for actors, but I want you to consider that it might not be over yet. I have here a letter from a gentleman who's seen the show three times, and — well, he's made an offer on it. He would like the company to tour the show through Spain immediately following the run here. I said I couldn't give him an answer until I'd talked to all of you. You don't have to give me a definite answer this minute, but I was wondering who might be interested in continuing on."

Chris, Thom, Maria, and Tamara's hands flew instantly into the air. Norman looked pensive for a moment, and raised his hand. Charlene nodded, and raised her hand. Stefan basked in the feeling of company between them all, some in street clothes, some half-dressed and half made-up.

"So what should I tell him?"

"Yes!" they cheered.

He smiled and put the letter into his pocket. "I'll tell him tonight when he comes to the show. But for now, don't think about that. Make our closing night here in Edinburgh the best show yet. Break a leg!"

~

The doors of the airport entrance slid open, and Stefan ran in. He'd overslept, despite having told the rest of the cast in the early hours after their closing night party to make sure they were on time. He saw Chris first, who wore big Sophia Loren sunglasses and sat on his fuzzy blue suitcase with Tamara, who'd adopted him, or whom he'd adopted — it was hard to tell. Thom leaned on his bag, hiding under a baseball cap, with Maria tucked under his arm. Charlene, somehow, stood composed, and un-hung-over beside them. Norman looked like a

garden gnome that was about to fall over. Stefan stood apart from them, laughing at the sight of them all.

“Okay, everyone,” instructed Charlene, “we should head to the gate.”

“Stef, where are your bags?” asked Maria.

“I’m not going,” he said. They protested, surprised. “This is where I’m supposed to be,” he insisted. No one could deny that his work as the show’s director was finished, and that Charlene could handle any issues that came up. He hugged them one by one, even Norman, and they each said their goodbyes to him. He watched as they passed through the security gate and out of sight.

He headed out to the parking lot to catch a bus back to the city.

Chapter Eleven

City of Stone and Green

Stefan stepped off the airport bus, back in the city. He walked with casual, slow steps to the path that led down into Princes Street Gardens. In another time, the Gardens were a fetid loch where the sewage ran down from the volcanic ridge on which the Old Town rested. The water contained the drowned bodies of dogs and witches. Today, it was a verdant park containing living dogs and sunbathers.

Stefan sat on a wooden bench marked with a memorial plaque and looked out at the people in the small grassy valley. He watched a group of shirtless boys kick a football, their skin nearly as pale as the white ball. Backpackers lay next to their packs and bedrolls. Stefan envied their portability, but didn't feel any compulsion to be one of them. Beyond the far side of the park, trains creaked and sang like metal whales as they pulled themselves along the tracks.

The cast would be well on their way to Spain now. But Stefan was not. He had enough money to stay in the hotel that night, then a few more nights in a hostel. Beyond that — he didn't want to think about what would happen beyond that.

His concentration flitted away like a moth. He got up and headed across the Waverley Bridge toward the Old Town. The city revealed more of itself to him now; he could navigate his way from the Grassmarket to the Cowgate to the Royal Mile — though the capillaries of wynds and closes seemed to open and close, or change their destinations, and a few corners of the town stayed out of his reach.

The Mile was alive with the tail ends of the Fringe Festival. Actors offered him handbills for their shows, but he refused them. He had no more inclination to be involved in theatre.

A scrawny man in cycling shorts made a show of twisting himself through hoops. A young woman dressed as a flapper posed robotically on an oversized music box, and further down the street a man stood rigid in Roman robes, his face covered in white greasepaint to make him look like a statue. Stefan wondered if this really constituted theatre, this standing still for money. He passed a trio of youths with dirty bare feet sitting on the sidewalk. One, with blond dreadlocks, played a bongo. *Hardly an instrument*, thought Stefan. The drummer's friend, with thin facial hair like moss, blew into a didgeridoo. *Bong practice*, Stefan quipped to himself. The third just sat with a floppy beach hat in front of him, a few copper and silver coins glinting inside. A small troupe of pastel-coloured clowns ran hand in hand through the crowd, laughing.

Theatre fulfils a spectrum of purposes, Stefan supposed, but he was through with it. He'd unleashed his father's play on the world, where it was working some kind of change. He didn't fully understand the effect himself. He was glad to be a part of it, and to finish the work his father's death left incomplete. But he felt a twinge of resentment: that was not what he'd asked for in his letter, to be *used*.

In the courtyard of an old quadrangle of buildings, Stefan stopped for a beer. Many of the buildings' rooms served as performance spaces, and Stefan enjoyed the energy of the audiences and performers who moved in and out of the small beer garden there. A group stood next to the picnic table where Stefan sat. "Do you mind if we sit here?" asked one of them. He knew they weren't asking him to leave the table, but he said he was finished, downed the last of his pint, and moved on.

As he walked, the sun crept down toward the ragged cliffs of Arthur's Seat. Many vantage points in the city had backdrops of rolling green hills that served to remind him where he was. The evening light took much longer to fail at this latitude than it did in Toronto, but eventually it gave way to night. As it did, Stefan found himself in the grassy fields of The Meadows, attracted there by electric lights that defied the darkness. A carnival was set up there, with a Ferris wheel that towered over several small rides covered in airbrushed pictures. Gambling stalls and games of chance rang with bells and sirens, and the night air was made hot and greasy by a wagon selling fish, cheeseburgers, and sausages fried in batter. At the edge of

the carnival was a lone caravan. Stefan walked toward this, passing a shirtless man who swung balls of fire on a chain.

The caravan was red and gold with a blue canopy, gypsy-like in colour, but obviously a modern camping caravan underneath, with rubber wheels and signal lights. Hand-painted red letters on a sign read "Psychic". Beneath the word was taped a slip of paper: "£5". The Matholics were nowhere to be found — which Stefan considered a good thing — so this would have to do for advice.

He put his foot on the metal step and looked inside. A heavy, rosy-faced woman with blond ringlet hair sat in the light of a small propane lamp, smoking a cigarette and scraping at a lottery scratch-card with a large brown coin. "Damn," she said, pushing the card over to a pile of others, and taking a sip from a large yellow can of beer before starting another card.

"Excuse me," said Stefan.

"Oh, sorry luv, Ah didnae see yeh there," said the woman. She wore flowy robes and armfuls of gold bangles, looking much the part, but her voice had a thick Glaswegian accent.

Stefan sat on the cushioned bench across from her. He took out a five-pound note and handed it across the table. The ornate batik cloth didn't disguise the fact that the table could fold away for travel.

"Wha' wouldjae like to know?" asked the woman.

Stefan wouldn't be fooled into being pumped for clues. "Oh, nothing in particular," he said, "just tell me what you get."

"Okay," she said. She closed her eyes for a moment, breathed deeply, then opened them. She straightened the table cloth in front of her, stubbed her cigarette out in an ashtray, then moved it, her beer, and the scratch cards to one side. She took out some playing cards, shuffled them, laid them out on the table, then scowled at them and put them back in their package. She held out her hand, so Stefan gave her his. "Hmm," she said, though they both knew she was bluffing.

Her head jerked back and her eyes opened wide. "Oh!" she said. Her head swung forward and banged twice on the table. As it rose up again, Stefan saw a familiar expression on her face. She smiled with his father's crooked, devilish-yet-warm smile. She looked down at herself, then up at Stefan with raised eyebrows, and honked her large breasts with her hands.

"Dad?" said Stefan. The medium's face grinned in response. "So did you like the play? Were you happy?"

The medium gave a thumbs-up.

"What about me, though? I am supposed to still be here, right?"

The medium nodded.

"But what am I supposed to do? I don't have a job or a place to stay, and I don't know anyone."

The medium's hands steepled on the table, then pushed down, splaying her fingers. Stefan looked at her, puzzled. She repeated the gesture more slowly, pushing and twisting her hands.

"Ah," said Stefan, "put down roots."

The medium touched her nose and nodded. Then she leaned forward and tapped her ear.

"Listen? To what?"

The medium gestured at everything around her, and tapped her ear again. She looked to the door, startled, as if she'd heard something herself. Her eyes opened wide, and her head dropped to the table with a clunk. As she regained consciousness, she looked up, bleary and confused. She put her hands to her temples and groaned.

Something outside struck the caravan and rocked it. Stefan and the medium held tight to the benches, looking at each other for explanation. It felt as if the caravan had been charged by a rhino. A moment later, it happened again, with more force than the first time. Stefan got to his feet and thanked the medium for her help. "You're welcome," she said, completely confused. Stefan jumped out of the open caravan door and looked around. Against the flashing

lights of the rides and games, he saw a figure, a man with a wide-brimmed hat, long cloak, and a scarf around his face. In the darkness, his pupils reflected the light like two luminous zeroes.

"Wait," said Stefan, backing away from the scratchman. "Why are you after me? What have I done?" But he knew the thing couldn't speak to him any more than his father could, likely for the same reasons. It wasn't present in the world by any normal means. The Matholics had used some unholy algebra to bring it across from somewhere else. Stefan reasoned that he was interfering in something important to them. "The play," he said, "you didn't want the play to happen. But it's over." He banished the thought of the players in Spain, in case somehow it might be read.

The scratchman drew close to him. Judging from the blow it gave the caravan, the night was its domain.

Stefan's father had spoken to him again. Whatever he was involved in, whatever his father's plan for him was, it wasn't finished yet. The Matholics made the same mistake he had: the play was *not* the thing. It was an instrument for getting him here, and it had effected some change, but there was more yet to do. Stefan felt a renewed sense of purpose, and was determined not to let this creature stop him. The only problem was that it was much stronger than him, and he had no idea what it was capable of at night.

The medium looked out from the caravan door holding her head. "What did you do to me?" she yelled at Stefan. The figure looked at her, and Stefan took the opportunity to run. He felt the man at his back, fingers clutching for the neck of his shirt, trying to pull him back into the darkness, but he managed to slip into the buzzing, clanking heart of the carnival.

Stefan tried to think as he walked through the booths and games. He wondered if he had any advantages he could use. He found one: this was *his* world. The scratchman's clothes and movements suggested that if it had ever been part of this world, it was some time ago. Stefan broke into a run, heading toward the street. Toronto taught him to be an expert in negotiating traffic, and his skills had adjusted to the reverse flow of traffic here. He stopped and paced his movement, stepping agilely into the space between moving cars. The next step brought him safely to the middle of the road.

The scratchman emerged from the trees that bordered The Meadows. It looked from side to side, perplexed by the traffic, then stepped hesitantly from the kerb into the street. A white sports car ploughed squarely into it, throwing it into the car ahead with enough force to crush the back hatch entirely. Both cars squealed to a halt. The sports car driver, barely twenty years old, opened his door and music pounded out. He walked slowly toward the other car as its driver climbed out. Both of them jumped back when the cloaked man jiggled, then rolled out of the mess of glass and metal onto the road. Its white head with its faint number tattoos was uncovered, slashed open on one side. Instead of bleeding, the wound in its head released a thin grey smoke. The figure reached up and pulled its hat from the wreck of the car, pushed the flap of its head back into place, and shoved the hat back on.

Stefan hailed a cab in the opposite direction. As he got in and told the driver his destination, he saw the scratchman crawl brokenly into the shadow under the wrecked car. He watched the two men through the rear windscreen as they searched under the car, but knew they'd find nothing.

Chapter Twelve

The Lay of the Land

Stefan ducked under a low roof-beam. He squinted in the darkness at the folded newspaper page in his hand to double-check if he was in the right place. The landlord turned back to him. "You have your own shower," he said, speaking as if Stefan had already taken the flat. The man opened a cupboard door to expose a small, waterproofed chamber like a missile tube overgrown with green and black. "The hot water turns on here," he said, pulling at a string, which came off in his hand. "I'll get that fixed," he said.

"Thanks," said Stefan, "but—" he feigned checking his watch. "Oh, I'm late for my next appointment. I'll call you if I'm interested."

The man looked annoyed. "Don't leave it too long. I have a lot of people who are interested in it. I only like to show to people who are serious. I'm not down in this part of town very often."

"I can see why," said Stefan. He ducked out of the flat and knocked the dust from his feet, not merely to show his disgust — this was the worst of the three flats he'd seen so far — but because the flat also had a dirt floor. He ran across the street to catch the bus going back to city centre. He climbed the stairs to the second floor of the bus, which gave him a perfect view of the grey day. He arrived at the flat, only to find a group of people lined up outside. The landlady hadn't said anything about others being there (he thought; it was so difficult for him to understand anyone on the phone) but it made sense to him now that they would get all the showings over with in one go.

The building was old; he liked that. It was a tall sandstone building on a wide corner, with curved bricks that followed the sweep of the road. A man — an estate agent or the landlady's husband, Stefan guessed — arrived and led the group through the door, which had no lock, but led into an indoor alley lined with green and cream tiles. The man led the group up the staircase on the right side of the tiled hallway. They climbed floor after floor past the other flats' doors. The higher they went, the more potential renters dropped away. Stefan got closer and closer to the man, and heard some of his patter about the building, something about the tenement being restored after the war. He assumed the man meant the Second World War, though he wouldn't have been surprised if he meant the Boer War.

They reached the top floor, which had a long glass pyramid of a skylight in the ceiling. The light that came in was milky, given the clouds outside, and the hallway was a mess, but Stefan fell in love. Whatever the flat was like, the place had a feeling he liked.

Only one couple of prospective tenants remained, a young man and woman. They were both overweight and gasping, and stopped outside the door of the flat to catch their breath. As the husband-agent unlocked the door, the couple looked at each other, nodded, and headed back down the stairs.

"I'll take it," said Stefan.

~

The grocery store was like a museum to Stefan. Every product on the shelves was a parallel universe version of something familiar. None of the packages had French on them, for starters. Even the brand-name products had slightly different names. Many things were completely new to him. He spent an hour walking up and down the aisles, in the end collecting only a small handbasket of goods, surprised at how startlingly unhealthy most of the offerings were. Chocolate, which seemed to be considered a food group here, had its own aisle, as did liquor.

He paid for his groceries, and his heart tripped over itself when he saw the total. It was still impossible for him not to convert prices into Canadian dollars. After putting the deposit and first month's rent down on the flat, he had little money left.

Walking home with his groceries, he passed a natural medicine shop. He was intrigued by the age of the shop and its hand-painted sign: "Alchemist". He went in. The bell over the

door alerted a woman who emerged from the back room. Stefan smiled and nodded at her, and browsed around, feeling her eyes on his back.

Each shelf held different sorts of remedies in plain brown bottles with scrawled names and complex Latin ingredients. “Energy Tablets” said one bottle. “Brain Formula” read another, which contained some sort of liquid. He read others — “Weight Melter”, “Beauty Amplifier”, “Woman’s Friend”, “Easy Dreams” — and stopped when he found “Men’s Sex Charger”. He moved away from that section, picked up the brain and dreams remedies, then quickly snatched the sex bottle, and took them all to the counter. The woman’s face was blank as she rang the items in at an old cash register. When she reached the sex pills, she looked up at him, then back down at the bottles, which she put into a small white paper bag. Stefan hurried out of the store and walked back to his new flat.

The sun went down as he started up the stairs, and by the time he reached the top the skylight was completely dark. He unlocked his door, enjoying the feeling of the large mortise key, which looked like it belonged to a castle or a monastery. The electricity in the flat was controlled by a card meter, and he’d forgotten to buy cards, so he put his groceries away in the dark. The gas, however, worked, so he made himself a pot of tea. The bed-sit was small and, like most rental flats, furnished. But Stefan chose to sit on the floor and leaned against his duffel bags, drinking tea until he was sleepy.

~

Stefan left the flat in the morning to buy a newspaper and a red pen, since this was the day the employment supplement came out. He took it back to the flat and read through it while eating a bowl of porridge. He ate his breakfast and read through all of the employment listings without circling anything with his pen. He took his bowl to the tiny kitchen and washed it, then returned to the paper. Again, he found nothing listed that he was qualified for. To stave off panic, he occupied himself with reading the rest of the paper.

At the back, he saw an ad that intrigued him. It read “Date-A-Processing — let us find your perfect match through the latest technology, M4W, W4M, M4M, W4W.” He looked up the address on his map, and decided that this might provide a good distraction. Besides, he thought, if somehow it worked the way they claimed it did, he would meet his perfect match.

The agency was an easy walk away, but it took Stefan several minutes to find its door, which it shared with several other businesses. He pressed the button next to their name, and a moment later the door buzzed and opened. He was greeted by a young woman in heavy glasses, who led him up to the second floor. “I’m here for the—”

“Matchmaker’s, aye?”

“Aye. Um, yes,” said Stefan.

“Please fill this out, then take it with you into that room over there when you’re finished.”

“Okay,” replied Stefan. He looked at the clipboard he’d been handed, which was filled with a vast array of questions about every aspect of his physiology, tastes, and experiences. He didn’t understand some of the “Do you like to—?” questions, so he answered those with a “No”.

“Hello,” said a tall man in a lab coat, entering the room. He took Stefan’s clipboard and looked it over, while Stefan squirmed in his chair. “Ah, looking for a man. Alright. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Right then, could you please remove your shirt, shoes, and trousers?”

“Um,” said Stefan.

“Then step up onto this platform,” continued the man. Stefan did as instructed, and as he stood in his boxers (which were not from his “public display” collection, as he hadn’t planned on this), the man stuck electrode pads to various parts of him, then flipped a switch, which made his body jerk into a taut, upright stance. The man passed a white hula-hoop over his body like a magician, then put it away, yanked the electrodes from him, and consulted

with a small white box, poking at its buttons until it coughed out a small piece of paper the size of a receipt.

"Here you are," said the man. "Your profile." Stefan felt disturbed at being reduced to a piece of paper — and such a small one. "We'll put this through the system and see who your perfect match is. When would you like to meet—" He checked the paper. "Him? Tomorrow night. Are you free?"

"Oh. Uh, well. Yeah, I guess I'm free."

"Perfect. Pick you up about eight?"

"Sure."

"Great. He'll see you then. Just pay at reception outside, and let us know how it goes."

"Right," said Stefan.

~

"And that's when I knew we had to break up," said Stefan's date. "I mean, he was a right bastard. And a terrible dresser." He looked at Stefan. "No offence."

"What?"

"Well, you know. What is that, *linen*?"

He looked down at the rough white shirt he wore. "Uh, no, it's hemp."

"Mmm," said the date, returning to his salad.

Stefan wondered if they'd put his profile in backwards. *Maybe I can get my money back*, he thought.

"So do yeh want tae huv sex? We both ken this isnae going well, but that's my Thursday night shot anyway, so we might as well. Yer kinda cute enough and all, just a bit too weird for me."

Stefan didn't remember talking for long enough to establish his weirdness, though he didn't doubt it was there. He considered the offer for a fleeting moment. It *had* been a long time since he'd had sex. "No," he said, deciding out loud, "we're not going to have sex." He looked around for the waiter and made a frantic gesture of signing on his hand to get the bill.

~

After a hasty and mutually noncommittal goodbye, Stefan and his date headed in opposite directions. The streets were filled with various groups of people, each with some excuse for getting — or already being — drunk. Stefan watched as a group of lads in dress shirts and jeans encountered a throng of young women in very short skirts and thin tops that rose high above their bellies. Fitness seemed to have no relationship to the amount of flesh the women showed, or the amount of bravado the men displayed. Stefan felt as if he were watching a nature program, as he tried to pick out which ones would be successful and which would get spurned. In the end, the two hormone-filled clouds passed through each other, and both groups remained intact, calling back at the other as they got further away.

A hen party bumped past, the women's tinsel-trimmed bee wings flicking against him. The bride-to-be was their queen, marked out with extra tinsel and sequins.

There was a roughness to the night life that Stefan found jarring, yet longed to be a part of. He walked away from it all, back toward his flat. He reached home, but didn't take his shoes off. He paced back and forth in the flat, and opened the cupboard to take a look, even though he knew he had nothing to drink in the house.

His eyes fell on the small brown bottle full of liquid marked "Men's Sex Charger". He picked it up and shook it, then opened the cap and sniffed it. It smelled of cherries and alcohol. He took a sip of it. It tasted much like a cough medicine Delonia gave him as a child once, when she finally acquiesced and bought medicine to stop him from keeping everyone awake. He licked the stuff from his lips, and liked what he tasted. Making an imaginary toast to

the ceiling, he downed the rest of the bottle. As the last of the flavour left his mouth, he read the label on the back of the bottle: "Take two drops once per week. Do not exceed recommended dosage."

Stefan put the bottle down and poured himself a pint-glass full of water, then drank it down. He searched his mind for facts about poison. *Milk*, he thought, then filled his glass again with milk from the fridge and gulped that. It was no use: his mouth still tasted of cherries. He looked about the flat frantically, stopping only to listen when he thought he heard growling. Then he realised that *he* was the source of the noise. He ran to his door, unlocked it, and looked out into the hallway. Maybe someone was out there, someone who wanted to have sex. But it was empty. He climbed up on the banister and reached for the hinged part of the skylight. He swung it open, grabbed the edges, and pulled himself up — somehow. The tiny rational part of his brain that remained tried to tell him that this was a bad idea, but it went unheeded.

Stefan stepped out onto the slick black slate tiles of the roof and looked around at the other buildings lining his street, all of them with the same old tiles and clay chimney-pots. The air was full of thick mist, which gave the moon above a halo. *Moondog*, he thought, *that's called a moondog*. So he bayed at the moondog, which he was sure would understand.

He dropped back down into his building and ran down the stairs to the street. Growling, he covered block after block, with no idea how much time passed. *Where to go?* he wondered. Then it came to him: *Calton Hill*. He'd heard that at night men went there to meet each other. He ran in that direction.

He passed by a church and headed up a gritty path. He walked up it, peering into the darkness, trying to find signs of men. He followed along a wet stone wall overgrown with green, and climbed up the hill. Someone moved to his right in the bushes, but when he turned to look, the man moved away. *Oh*, Stefan realised, *I'm still growling*. He did his best to stifle the impulse as he continued on. He reached the top of the hill, an open expanse featuring several classical buildings — the dome of the old observatory, the stone cylinder memorials, and the orphaned columns of an incomplete replica of the Parthenon. He climbed the tall base that supported the columns and looked out over the spires of the Old Town that poked through the fog. He looked at the moon and took a deep breath, about to howl out again. But before he could, he noticed someone looking up at him. Stefan let the breath out with a big smile. "Hi," he said.

"Hiya," replied the man.

He's plain-looking, thought Stefan, *but he has nice eyes. He'll do.*

Stefan jumped and the man caught him. Stefan laughed, and kissed him furiously.

"Tastes like cherry," said the man.

Stefan silenced him with more kissing.

~

Light soaked through the thin orange curtains of the stranger's room. Stefan looked around and saw an alarm clock. Its white flip-numbers read "11:20". Stefan looked at the stranger, who, now, didn't seem even remotely attractive.

The man felt him stir and opened his eyes. "Morning," he said. Stefan forced a smile. The man stood up and trudged, naked, out of the room. His pudgy hairiness repelled Stefan; there was nothing remotely sexual about him. Stefan looked down at himself, also naked, and felt equally repulsed. He heard the toilet flush and some noise from the kitchen. A few minutes later, the man returned with two cups of coffee. He handed one to Stefan and sipped at his, then took a cigarette from the pack on the bedside table and lit it. "Want one?" he asked. Stefan shook his head. The man took a long drag, then put the cigarette down in an ashtray. He leaned over to kiss Stefan, speaking "Good morning" in a cloud.

Stefan jumped up. "I, uh—" he stammered.

"Oh. Okay. I get it. No problem."

"Yeah," said Stefan, pacing around the room, his bits flapping as he tried to find the various pieces of his clothing that had been flung about the night before.

"Maybe I'll see you again sometime," said the man.

"Yeah, maybe," said Stefan, in a way that sounded more *No chance in hell* than he intended. He pulled on his clothes and waved to the man, who stayed in bed. Stefan burst out the front door.

A few blocks from the house, Stefan stopped, leaned with his hands on his thighs, and sighed. He looked at his hands.

He could see through them.

He searched himself, and found that all his body parts had become transparent. He panicked, and ran down the street until he found an open patch of sunlight. The effect was worse here; he could barely see himself at all.

He ran toward home, but didn't know what he could do about this there. On his way, he passed the alchemist's. It was closed, but he saw the woman inside who'd served him before. He knocked frantically on the glass pane of the door. She squinted, unable to see him, then cautiously moved toward the door while he continued banging. She finally caught sight of him and let him in.

"What's happened to me?" asked Stefan frantically.

She grabbed his face, turning it back and forth. She took his hands and flipped them palm up, then palm down. "Looks to me like you've got a case of sex poisoning."

"What?"

"You've had sex with someone you oughtn't've. And you've lost some of your essence." She rummaged around in the counter in front of her and produced a large clear bottle of lozenges. She counted some of these out onto a square of waxed paper, which she folded into a packet for him. "Suck on one of these every hour until you go to bed tonight. No more Sex Charger for you. That'll be two pound fifty."

"Thanks," he said, paying her.

She led him out, holding his translucent arm. Before locking the door, she said, "And stay off that hill."

~

Stefan took a walk that night before bed. He was nearly restored now, though his innards still felt hollow. He decided to walk the length of the Royal Mile, since that was supposed to be lucky, and he felt he could use a dose of luck. He dutifully spat on the Heart of Midlothian, the brick shape laid into the ground in front of the cathedral, which was also supposed to be lucky. The crowd was thick here, gathered around one of the remaining buskers who'd stayed on past the end of the Fringe Festival to earn a few more pounds. Stefan crossed the street. He stopped to look at the large concrete base of a statue oxidised green by the elements. The figure wore a loose toga, which fell from his oversized, bulky frame, exposing what looked like a pair of sagging breasts. Propped between one hand and his thigh was what looked like a stone tablet. "Hume" read the plaque under the figure. Whoever Hume was, Stefan thought, he probably wasn't happy about the breasts.

"Who are you?" asked the statue.

Stefan looked at it, surprised. Perhaps it was another busker wearing greasepaint. *That would be an awfully big busker*, thought Stefan. He figured he should answer it. "My name is Stefan Mackechnie."

"That's just an idea," said statue-Hume, "and ideas are subject to change."

"Who are you?" asked Stefan.

The statue's face, green-streaked black metal with white bird droppings, scowled as he thought. "I don't remember," he answered.

The busker up the street finished his act and the crowd flowed into the street. Stefan stopped talking to the statue and moved on.

Chapter Thirteen

Take Me to Your Team Leader

Stefan put his hand under the shower head. The water was still cold. The shower's controls were set into a plastic box like a radio, and its lights were on. Stefan fiddled with the dials, but wasn't sure what the icons beside them were supposed to mean. One icon looked like flames, but Stefan was pretty sure the device was limited to issuing water. He thought the other, a spray of blue bullets, might have something to do with the water pressure, but no matter how he adjusted it, the shower head continued to drool.

He scrubbed his head over the tub, and tiny filaments of hair covered its floor. He'd had his floppy hairdo cut off in favour of the local style, a close-cropped electric razor cut. It looked tidy, but he felt uncomfortable seeing his hairline so clearly, like the vanishing wetness in the sand as the tide goes out.

His job interview was in three-quarters of an hour. He couldn't wait any longer for the water to heat up. Bracing himself, he threw off his dressing-gown, jumped into the shower, and screamed as the shower head released a high-pressure jet of scalding water.

~

"Your background check came back spotless," said the young man interviewing Stefan.

"Well, in UK terms, I'm only a month old," he answered.

"Do you have a National Insurance Number?"

"I contacted them, and they said they couldn't give me one until I had a job."

"Ah, well you can't start work until you have a National Insurance Number."

Stefan looked at the man, perplexed.

"Nevermind," said the interviewer, "you can get a temporary one while they sort that out." The man put his application in a folder and closed it. "I think you'd make a great addition to the team. There are just a few final tests we have to complete to see if you're the right fit for the Sprechen-Z Holdings Limited International Family of Companies."

"Okay," said Stefan, following the interviewer, humming "Consider Yourself at Home". They walked into a small room containing one small desk.

"Could you please sit here?" asked the man. Stefan sat, and the man took out a large set of callipers. He measured the distance from Stefan's head to the desk in front of him, the distance from his head to the back of his chair, and the angle of the bend in his legs. "Could you please reach for the papers in front of you?" Stefan did, and the man took precise measurements of each movement. "Right handed?" he asked. Stefan shook his head *no*, and held up his left. The man gave a look of consternation, but continued on, now using a tape measure.

He finished his calculations in a large binder. "This is just about perfect," he said. "I think you'll be a good fit in our organisation. Just one last test." Stefan followed him to another room, even smaller, where the man sat him in front of a monitor flashing tiny orange characters and strapped an operator's headset to his head. "There you go."

"What am I supposed to do?" asked Stefan.

"Oh, nothing. Just stare at the screen."

Stefan stared. The man left the room, and Stefan kept staring. His eyes glazed over, and his mind wandered back to the recording studio in Canada. He felt a pang for his days of high-paid, specialised work. It embarrassed him to go back into the workplace with no transferable skills.

The flashing orange figures on the screen had a mesmerising effect, and Stefan found himself drifting further backward through his life. He was eight years old again, in the kitchen with his mother. "Just keep studying," she said, as she shut the door behind her. Men banged on the front door and shouted at her through it. "I'll teach my own goddamned son if I want to!" she yelled back. "Just try to stop me!"

“Hello?” said the interviewer. Stefan snapped back to the present.
“How long have I been sitting here?”
“Three hours,” said the man, shining a light into his eyes and looking closely at them.
“Excellent. No bleeding.” The man straightened up and extended his hand. “You’re hired. Welcome to the family.”
“Thank you,” said Stefan, shaking the man’s hand. “What exactly do you do here?”
“We run a mobile phone network.”
“Oh.” He was about to mention his difficulty with telephones, but thought better of it.

~

The next day, he woke up early and filled the tub using the shower head. The result was a tub filled with strata of hot and cold water, but it did the job. Stefan did his best to iron a shirt — not really knowing how — and managed to leave the house in time to catch the bus for work. The second floor of the bus was jammed with boys and girls in blazers and ties. He looked at them as he tried to figure out how to knot his own tie, ashamed to think that his mother had always done it for him.

He sniffed, conscious of smoke. He looked to the back of the bus, where a group of boys about twelve years old slouched down in their seats, smoking. Another held a lighter under a crinkled piece of foil, cooking something.

He spotted a familiar landmark outside and rang the bell. The driver stopped, and Stefan descended the stairs and got off the bus, realising once he did that he was still several blocks away from the office. The rest of the walk was a pleasant one, beside a small river with water the colour of ale, through a section of town that was a mix of chunky old buildings and featureless industrial blocks.

He reached his office five minutes late and rushed into the huge stone building, which looked like a cross between a church and a munitions building. He joined a large group of new employees with name-tags gathered in the lobby. A young woman in a business suit with a male counterpart raised her hands and addressed them. “Welcome,” she said, “to Orientation Day!” She turned and pointed ahead with both hands, and the recruits followed her.

In a large room, they were broken into teams, then given a small pad of paper covered in small blocks — a litany of personal particulars they were asked to provide about their work histories and education. Stefan had no answers to fit many of the questions, and had to leave their boxes blank.

One by one, they were called out of the room. When Stefan’s turn came, he was taken to a room where someone took his picture, rolled his fingers in ink then onto a sheet of paper, then scraped a small piece of skin from the inside of his mouth and put it into a plastic vial. Like the others, he returned to the conference room with a plastic ID card featuring his pale and surprised-looking face.

The next hour was devoted to games designed to teach them about the organisation’s structure (he did not do well), and show them the power of developing strong brand recognition. With a war cry of “Service first and last!”, the recruits were released to their various departments. Stefan was hired, he discovered, for the Outstanding Team. His initial pleasure at this evaporated when he realised that the term was a euphemism for “Collections Department”.

A trainer deposited him into the care of Jenny, his “line manager”. The supervisor, she told him, was away in Greece on holiday. If he had any questions, he was to ask her. She was about to leave, but he stopped her and asked what he was supposed to do.

“You mean they didn’t—?” she said, then snorted angrily. She looked up at him and shook her ginger bob of hair. “I don’t know why they spend all that money on that nonsense then send you down here without a clue about how to do the job we hired you for.”

“Sorry,” said Stefan.

"Ach," she said, "it's not your fault. Come on, I'll get you started." She then led him through a labyrinthine system for following up on overdue mobile accounts, which involved correlating various information stored on a machine with a small yellow monitor like a goldfish bowl in a frame, a wall of filing cabinet drawers, and a metal chest full of what looked like rifle rounds, but turned out to be microfilm. At the end of her description of the process, Stefan thanked her, and asked where the bathroom was. "Bathroom," she laughed, "you want a bath? The toilets are over there." He thanked her again, walked hurriedly to the toilet, locked himself in a cubicle, and threw up.

He hadn't absorbed any of what the woman said. *I'm a dummy*, he thought, *a total idiot*. He felt nervous about going back to his desk, and felt his throat choking up. *I won't be able to pay my rent. I won't be able to eat. I'm stupid and I'm going to die*. A final plea popped into his mind — *Mommy!* — a word so repellent to him it drove him back onto his feet and out to the office.

"Jenny," said Stefan, "I have no idea about any of what you said. Could you go through that again?"

"Oh," she said, "sorry. I've been doing this for twenty years. I forget it's complicated when you're new. Let's go over it again. In a week, you'll be doing it in your sleep. God knows we do." He laughed, relieved. "Would you like a chocolate?" she asked him, pointing to her desk. The half-dozen women in his section all had boxes of chocolate on their desks.

"No thanks," said Stefan, "but do you have any gum?"

~

Over the next few weeks, life fell into a pattern. Stefan enjoyed the simplicity of it: he got up early in the morning, ironed a shirt while the bath filled, washed, made coffee, and read the newspaper on the bus to work. Mornings went quickly, then he ate his lunch alone in the canteen. Then he finished off the day and went home, ate, and went to bed.

The women in his section were friendly to him and eager to help him, but their pack was largely impenetrable, having developed over decades. People like him came and went, but they stayed. They moved together like a flock of birds, going outside to smoke, going to lunch, then leaving to go home to their families when five o'clock came. At the moment, they were away for a retirement lunch. Most of them resented the company, but were happy to eat and drink at its expense when another of them broke free.

Stefan slid his card through the punch-clock, finished his lunch break. He sat down at his desk, wading back into the set of files he'd left. The process of following up on overdue accounts was straightforward now. They issued letters which sometimes came back with payment, and just as often didn't. Some customers contested their charges, some moved without remembering to update their mailing address, and others did their best to evade having to pay. But something about the file in front of Stefan perplexed him. The subscriber hadn't made his payments for two months, but that was nothing unusual.

The name, he thought. Something about the name seemed familiar. He looked at the newspaper on his desk. The headline read "Police probe city developer's death plunge". The copy underneath elaborated, describing the inquiry into the death of a wealthy businessman involved in redeveloping parts of the city. The developer's name, Reginald Mackenzie, was the same as the name on the invoice in front of him.

When the women returned from their lunch, wobbling back to their desks, Stefan approached his line manager. "Jenny," he said, "what do we do if someone dies?"

"Depends," she answered.

Stefan held up the newspaper.

"Oh no," she said. "If it's a suspicious death, the police get involved. Och, it's such a hassle." She stopped to think. "But that was back in June. They normally would have contacted us by now."

"Yeah," said Stefan, "here's the funny thing: someone's still making calls on the phone."

"So the police—?"

"Didn't find the phone on him. Someone else must have found it."

"Oh help," sighed Jenny.

"Can I take this case?" he asked. "My numbers are way up. I've processed enough cases for the next month."

"Well," said Jenny, "I don't know. The supervisor's away. You'd have to ask—" She stopped and shook her head. "I can't."

"What?"

"I'd have to go before the directors," she said. "And I don't want to do that."

"I'll do it," said Stefan.

Jenny looked at him, surprised. "If you want to. But I can't go with you."

Stefan didn't understand what the issue was. "Okay. Just tell me where to go."

"I'll take you," she said, "but I won't go in."

He nodded, collected the file from his desk, and followed her. She led them down several halls, up a grand old staircase, then to a door.

"They're up there," she said.

"What should I do?" he asked.

"I don't know. I've never seen them myself. Few people have. I hear they brought them here when the company bought the property, and they've never been down from there since. Other people say they used to belong to the last company that was in this building. Nobody knows how old they are."

"What do they do?"

"Nobody knows that, either. But it's very important. It's very expensive to keep them."

"Okay," said Stefan, straightening his tie and organising his files, "I'm going up."

"Good luck," said Jenny.

Stefan opened the door, revealing a small, narrow staircase. The stairs were old, worn wood, with a green carpet running up their middle. The door closed behind him, leaving him in the pale light of the oil lamps fixed to the walls. The air was cold. He climbed for what seemed like an especially long time. Eventually, he reached a thick wooden door covered in intricate carvings of stags, armour, crowns, unicorns, and twisting, snakelike creatures.

With effort, he opened the door and stepped into the semi-darkness of what he took for an attic or a chapel. He shivered, and squinted, trying to get his bearings. Something across the room moved slowly. A lone lamp lit, and a tall man with a long face and white hair turned a key to raise the flame slightly. He sat at a long, heavy wooden desk with eight other figures. Some were short, some average, others round and fat, but they all wore the same white hair and dusty grey clothes of no discernible age or fashion. Before them were opened huge books, and each had a pen beside him, rested in an inkwell.

The tall man pursed his lips and took an eternity to wheeze the word "What?"

"I was working on my files this morning — I work on the Outstanding Team, I'm new here — and I came across this case," said Stefan. His words felt like they were coming out at a hummingbird's pace. "It might be a suicide. See, the police didn't find the mob—"

The tall man held up his hand, and Stefan stopped speaking. The man turned his head to one side then the other, looking at the other directors, who returned his gaze. He turned back to Stefan. "Investigate," the man articulated carefully.

"Myself? Thanks. I'll let you know what I—"

The man raised his hand again. "Go."

"Right," said Stefan. "Thanks. I'll, um, I'll go now. Thanks." He turned, slipping on the dusty floor, and exited through the door, which was still closing. He ran down the stairs, back to Jenny.

"They asked me to investigate!" he said.

“Look at you,” she said. “I’m proud. You’re one of those ambitious types. You won’t be in our section for long. So what are you going to do first?”
Stefan’s face fell. “I have to call the number.”

~

The next afternoon, Stefan still hadn’t made the call. He sat at his desk, looking at the phone in front of him. He’d managed not to make any calls so far, but now it was inevitable. He reached for the phone and noticed his hand shaking. He’d made telephone calls before. It was awkward, trying to hear and speak with the constant interruption of the second voice, and he was embarrassed that he came across badly, but he managed nonetheless. He wasn’t sure why he felt so nervous now.

He pulled his arm back, then lunged, picking up the handset. He looked at the number, which by now he’d memorised, and dialled it. He pressed the handset to his head, ready to listen carefully.

The line rang several times, and he exhaled. Perhaps there wouldn’t be an answer. Then he heard a click. “Hello?” he said.

“Hello?” said a voice.

One single voice.

“Hello?” he asked again.

“Hello,” replied the other voice. He knew the sound of it intimately. “It’s you,” he said. He was about to launch into all the questions he’d bottled up for years, but the phone started to buzz, then to feed back, until the sound became an unbearable screech. He had to slam the phone into its cradle to stop the noise.

~

On the weekend, Stefan grew restless. He was determined to make the best of a rare sunny day. He caught a bus to Portobello, and spent the afternoon walking along the shore of the Firth of Forth, an offshoot of the North Sea that jutted into Scotland’s east coast.

The days were getting shorter. The sun lowered, turning the water into molten bronze. Stefan left the shore, his face still warm and his lungs full of sea air, and walked back toward his bus stop. He detoured into a chippy next to the stop and ordered a fish supper. “Salt and sauce?” asked the man behind the counter. Stefan agreed, and the man slapped a large piece of fish like a battered tie onto a square of paper, shovelled chips onto it, waved a can-like salt shaker over the meal, then squirted vinegary brown sauce back and forth over it. He deftly wrapped the corners up, twisted them, made it all into a hot packet, and gave this to Stefan in exchange for a few pound coins.

Stefan carefully unwrapped part of the package and ate chips as he walked to the bus stop. As he waited, a group of young men walked into the chip shop. One of them talked animatedly, dominating the conversation. Stefan’s bus pulled up as the men left the shop again. He stepped onto the bus and dropped his coins into the collection box, just as another of the men spoke. “No, no, no,” the man argued with the loud friend, “that’s not true. That wasn’t how it happened.” *The voice from the phone.* Stefan turned to look as the door closed behind him and caught a glimpse of the speaker — tall, slim, with a wild brush of black hair. *Ask the driver to stop!* he thought. But he hesitated, and they pulled away from the kerb. Stefan rushed to the back of the bus, balancing his supper in his hand, and watched the figures recede from sight.

What if that was The One, he thought, and I just missed him?

That night, he lay awake in his small bed, waiting anxiously to get back to work.

Chapter Fourteen

Peter Hailes

Stefan wondered if showering would have any effect, he was doing it so quickly. Bubbles flew onto the tiles as he slicked the soap from his body. He jabbed his finger at the shower's "On/Off" button and ripped his towel in half as he yanked it from the hook on the wall. Today, that didn't bother him. He scrubbed himself with both halves as he walked through the flat, dropping them when he reached the clothes he'd thrown on his bed for today. His shirt was wrinkled terribly, so he held it over the kettle while it boiled, then dressed and poured half of the boiling water into a cup of instant coffee and the other half into a bowl of instant porridge.

He gave up on breakfast. This morning his stomach was not suited to food. It was a zoo's butterfly room during mating season. He swung a tie over his neck (*Did I wear this tie yesterday? Do I care?*), cinched it tight, and headed out the door.

The bus arrived at glacial speed then stopped every four feet as it travelled. Stefan tried to be patient. He looked out the top floor windows. He looked around at the other riders. The children in blazers with posh accents didn't intimidate him today. They weren't smarter or more important than him, they just had accents. He spoke quietly to himself, finally having a hang of the sound of their voices. "Mummy, Mummy, my pony is dead!" The kids in the back seats with the rougher dialect cooked their drugs for the day's sales, and Stefan found it cute. *Tomorrow's entrepreneurs today.*

At the next stop the youngsters stampeded out, and the bus continued on to the edges of the city. Stefan shot his finger like an arrow, ringing the bell as soon as the office came into sight. He raced down the stairs and leapt out the door, saying "Thank you, Driver," as he'd heard others say (adopting the accent, too).

"Morning, Jenny," he said as he jumped into his chair.

"You're early today," she said.

"Just anxious to get started on my investigation."

"Ah, right, The Case of the Missing Mobile." She sat one half of her round bum on his desk. "So how are you going to find out who has it?"

Stefan blinked.

"I imagine you're going to want to talk to Tech."

"Yes, right. That's what I was thinking."

Jenny laughed. "And how are you going to get them to respond to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I put in for a new keyboard last winter. I got an e-mail back saying they were busy this year." She stood up. "I'm sure you'll think of something. After all, you're the only person I know who's ever seen the directors."

"Where's their office?" he asked.

"There's a steel door at the back of the building. They're behind that."

Stefan thanked her. He logged onto the company e-mail system, found the Tech department in the directory, and sent a message to them. They didn't reply. He sent another message, asking if they'd received his first one. Again, no reply. He wrote a third time, mentioning that the directors has asked him to investigate, and asked if they would help him. No reply. He sent another: "Hello?"

Half an hour later, he received a reply: "Bugger off."

He went outside to look for the door to the Tech department. He had to punch out to leave the building, but he didn't care about that. He followed one wall around to the back, where he found a steel panel about the size of a door, but with no markings and no handle. He knocked, timidly at first, then harder and harder, but the door was too dense to convey any sound to the other side. There also seemed to be a distinct lack of anyone listening.

"Excuse me," said someone behind him, startling him. The man wore matching blue work trousers, jacket, and cap. In his arms was an open cardboard box containing a big silver

bag marked "Coffee". The man stepped up to the door, putting his hands on his hips, which made an imposing shape of his broad, muscular frame.

"What?" said a voice from no discernible direction.

"Catering," answered the man, unbothered by the abruptness of the voice.

"Can I give you a hand with this?" Stefan asked the man.

"Sure, if you want to get one of those canisters," said the man, nodding his head toward his truck. Stefan went to it and found several fountain drink refill canisters like small torpedoes. He tried to lift one marked "Irn-Bru", but it was too heavy. He rolled it on its end to the open door, then down a steeply sloped corridor. The only direction sign he saw was marked "Bomb shelter" in vintage lettering. He followed that, passed several times by the delivery man, who carried a canister under each arm, then made more trips with boxes of coffee, followed by boxes of candy bars, sugar packets, and cartons of irradiated milk. Stefan continued rolling his canister and reached the Tech room at the same time the delivery man made his last trip, carrying a single bunch of bananas. They stood with the supplies in a small pool of light under a lone bulb.

A tall person entered the light and signed the delivery man's clipboard. Stefan wasn't sure if it was a man or a woman, this person with a large beak of a nose on a tiny head. Its colourless skin and bulging eyes gave it the look of a deep-sea anomaly. The figure had long, slicked-back, bleached yellow hair, and wore a floor-length black leather coat. Looking up, it saw Stefan. "What is *he* doing here? Why did you let him in?"

"He was helping me," said the man, tearing off a receipt. "Gotta go."

"Take him with you!" shrieked the blond creature, showing long, stained rodent teeth.

"Sorry. He's not with me. I think he works with you. Later."

"No!" it yelled, but the man was gone. It turned to Stefan. "Get out! You can't be in here."

"Actually, I think I can," said Stefan, annoyed now. He held out a printed copy of the case details. "The directors told me to investigate."

The blonde thing grabbed the paper and examined it. It pondered something for a moment. "You can reach the number?" it asked.

"I've only called once."

"Perfect," it said, smiling wickedly. The thing, which Stefan presumed was the Tech manager, left him, then turned back, gesturing for him to follow. He reached out for the walls and followed it into the dark. They went further down an incline, then reached a set of stairs, which the thing neglected to tell him about, possibly on purpose. At the bottom, Stefan found himself in a low room lit with long, fluorescent black light tubes. Pipes and wires hung from the ceiling.

Along one wall of the room were what looked like aquaria full of wires and green silicon boards. A picture flickered on three sides of each aquarium, footage of a horribly grisly war. These movies were watched by large, unmoving, mole-like people whose long black coats flowed to the floor. Their eyes were tiny, near-blind dots on large white heads covered with hanging, oily hair. Only their stubby pink fingers moved, poking furiously at keyboards. Stefan realised that they were controlling the war they watched. The blond thing audibly cleared its throat, the fingers paused, hit a single button in unison, and their aquaria filled with lines of code.

"We'll help you with the investigation," said the manager. It went to one of the coders, whispered in its ear, then turned back to Stefan. "Call the number," the manager told him, pointing to the long desk in the middle of the room. Amongst the cables, spare parts, and coffee-makers was a solitary telephone.

Stefan lifted the receiver and poked out the familiar numbers. All his butterflies took flight as the voice answered. "Peter," it said.

"Now!" yelled the blond thing. The coder-moles tapped furiously, and their screens filled with snow.

"Hello?" asked Stefan, watching the aquaria as a slideshow of buildings flickered in the fuzz. He turned away. "My name is Stefan." He'd wanted to say that for so long. Even now, he doubted that he'd be heard.

"Hello, Stefan. I think you've got the wrong number." The phone hummed and started to feed back.

The manager whispered in his ear, "Keep talking." Stefan turned around and looked at the screens. A lone figure walked in the snow there, like a charcoal rubbing in motion. Stefan looked at the manager's grinning face. "Got him," it mouthed. "Calling the police."

Stefan slammed down the phone. "What is this?" he asked.

"Cellidar," said the manager, "developed by mobile companies in conjunction with the government. By tracking bounced signals between our towers, we can 'see' anywhere we want." It pointed to an aquarium screen. "Look, he doesn't even know he's being watched. As long as he keeps moving, he's ours."

"Great," said Stefan, forcing a smile. "Thanks for your help. I guess I should get out of your way."

"Don't you want to stay and watch?"

"Uh, no," he said, "I—I should—" He pointed to the door and ran.

~

"Could you please turn the radio on?" asked Stefan.

"Where do you want to go?" asked the taxi driver.

"I'll tell you in a second. Could you just turn on the radio?"

"Ah," said the man, chuckling, "you're anxious to know how the game's going. World Cup, I don't blame yeh."

"Right," said Stefan, smiling. He leaned forward and pressed his ear to the open space between the Lucite panels, listening to the radio. *Ah'm no sure wha's happenin', Rab.*

~

"Ah'm really jus' no sure," said Peter Hailes. He didn't elaborate. His mother would hit him if she heard him speaking. His father was proud of the Scots language, but his mother was determined that he learn to speak "properly". When he was upset, though, the Received Pronunciation went out the window. *Oot the windae*, he thought, smiling briefly.

He passed a large shop window and stared into it. He ran his hand through his hair. He'd intended to tidy it, but it just flopped about in a different way, like a flattened crow on the road with wings akimbo. His eyes glanced to one side. He gasped and spun around, but no one was there. He knew that before looking. Beside him in the window, though, there he was: *that man*.

His whole life, Peter had seen glimpses of him, first as a boy, then older and older as he grew, too. He'd told his father, who was a believer in such things, but knew better than to tell anyone else.

Lately, though, it was getting unbearable. It wasn't just a shimmer or a peripheral catch anymore. The man was there, as if he were sitting in the window display, leaning forward.

His father was out of the country on business, so Peter called Rab, his best friend. Or, more correctly, his best friend with a mobile phone. "Rab," he said, forcing himself to be calm, "I think there's something wrong with me. I need you to meet me."

"Alright," said Rab, "where?"

"Meet me in Waverley Station."

~

The taxi rumbled over the cobbles, wobbled around a corner, and tipped down a steep decline. Cars blocked the roundabout ahead. "This is fine," said Stefan, shoving bills through at the driver and opening the door.

"Wait. Your change." But Stefan was away, running down the hill. The wind was strong, and he felt tiny pinpricks of dampness hitting his face.

He turned and looked down the length of the Waverley Bridge. It was full of people.

An announcement came over the loudspeakers below in the train station. Just as loud, Stefan heard the second voice, and spotted a man on the bridge, talking into a mobile, his mouth moving in conjunction with the words he heard. Stefan ran toward him.

The man looked up and panic filled his eyes. He looked around, then back to Stefan. The rain intensified, and fell in huge, pelting drops. The man shivered, staring at him. Stefan could hardly speak when he reached him. He pointed at the mobile phone, then took it and threw it as hard as he could from the bridge. It arced through the sky and landed on the tracks below. He took the man's hand and pulled him across the street to the wall there. "Stand still," he said, daring to keep hold of his hand as they stood still beside the wall. A moment later, a police car drove past them, down the ramp leading into the station.

"It's you," said Peter, turning to him.

Stefan smiled. "Keep talking."

"My name is Peter."

"I'm Stefan."

"You're real."

"You, too. I've had my doubts."

"What does this mean?" asked Peter.

"I have no idea," said Stefan. He stared at Peter, drunk with the intensity of his company. "I can't believe I'm finally talking to you."

"I can't believe I'm finally seeing you."

Stefan let go of Peter's hand and crossed the street to look down. Police combed the tracks below. One of them held up the shattered mobile phone. Between that and the dense sheets of rain, Stefan hoped they were safe to move. He held out his hand to Peter. Peter smiled and grabbed it willingly.

They ran.

Chapter Fifteen

Dig Nation

"This is it," said Stefan, unlocking the door. Peter walked around him and stopped just inside. Stefan followed Peter's eyes to the floor, where the water dripped from his clothes and hair. "Oh, I'll get you a towel," he said, running to the bathroom. He grabbed the first thing he found and ran back. Peter looked at his hands, which held two halves of a towel. "One for each of us," said Stefan, smiling.

Stefan rubbed himself briskly with the towel, but he couldn't stop his teeth from chattering. He realised it had nothing to do with the cold. He smiled at Peter and spoke, his teeth chopping up his words as they came out. "I'm ner-r-r-vous.". Peter held up his hand: he was shaking, too.

"Where did you come from?" asked Peter.

"I came from Canada."

"I suppose I was asking that, but, in a bigger way, who are you?" He looked into the coat-rack mirror on the wall, which framed both of them, standing side by side. "All my life, it's been like this. I've been seeing you there. Now here you are."

Stefan stared incredulously at the young man with the dripping black hair and the pale drowned-looking skin. His jaw and thin lips were outlined with uneven black hairs, and as Stefan looked at his eyes, so brown they seemed black, he felt himself falling in. "My name's Stefan Jackrabbit Mackechnie," he said. "I'm thirty-two, I — I have no idea where to start. What about you? I thought I was crazy, hearing your voice all that time. But you're real. And you're standing right here in my hallway."

"Jackrabbit?" smirked Peter.

"Shut up." Stefan's reverie was broken. He didn't expect Peter to tease him.

"I don't think I can manage the 'Stefan' part, either. It's a bit fancy. Mind if I call you Ste?"

Stee. Stefan found every word this man said beautiful, even if he was teasing — the timbre of his alto voice, the roll of his Rs and the swallowed, glottal Scottish vowels.

"I don't mind at all. Hardly anyone knows my name here, except—"

At work.

"How *did* you get that phone?"

"I found it," said Peter, blankly.

Stefan sighed. "I hoped so. There was this police investigation, and — and you know what? I couldn't care less about that right now." He directed them inside to his room with a tilt of his head. Peter cocked an eyebrow. "Dry clothes," insisted Stefan.

"Oh. Right," said Peter, smiling.

Stefan took their coats and hung them on the rack. They slipped out of their soaked shoes and stretched off their wet socks. Even the sight of Peter's bare feet made Stefan excited. The floor creaked as they walked to the old wooden wardrobe from which Stefan's clothes spilled. He looked Peter up and down, as if sizing him up, then put his hands on Peter's waist. Peter did the same to him.

"Thirty? Thirty-two?" said Stefan.

"Around that, but I like 'em baggy."

"My mother bought me these. They're made of—"

"Ste, I don't care."

"Oh, you want to kiss me, don't you?"

"What?" asked Peter, with mock indignation. "What do you take me for?"

"You don't? Oh, I'm sorry. I just thought that, from the way you were looking at me—" He walked away from Peter, then looked back. "But nevermind. Still, it was nice bumping into you," he said, nudging him with his hips.

Peter leaned against him. "Nice bumping into you, too."

They stood, their noses an inch apart, laughing. Stefan looked at Peter's eyes, then dared to look *into* them. In there was the soul of this person he loved already, and felt he always had. When he was younger, he used to stare into a mirror until he didn't recognise himself and felt frightened. He'd never risked looking that way at someone else, but now he was, and it was having the opposite effect: he felt sure of this other, safe. In those eyes was something, not something he could see, yet there it was and he could feel it. Definitely a soul.

His smile dropped, and he reached his hands under Peter's wet T-shirt. The coldness of the skin there scared him and he shivered. It soon warmed to his touch.

"Peter Hailes," Stefan whispered.

"Jackrabbit," laughed Peter, then kissed him. *His lips were perfect*, thought Stefan, *just solid enough, just smooth enough*. He remembered Ming: even before things went bad between them he hated those lips, like trying to kiss a plate of strawberry gelatine. And then the tongue, that meaty welcome mat that flopped out the instant their lips touched. Stefan smelled something on Peter's breath, not the cigarettes or booze that usually preceded sex, but the faint smell of the bodily anticipation of it. This kiss was different. It wasn't duty paid, but a willing participation in the physical presence of this person who so excited him.

Peter grabbed Stefan's hips and pulled him close, laughing naughtily into his mouth. Stefan laughed back and grabbed Peter's bum. "What's that?" he asked, looking down.

"That's a roll of coins."

"You've been saving up."

"Cheers." Peter ventured a hand to the front of Stefan's trousers. "Not so bad yourself."

The blood rushed from Stefan's head, and he wondered if he might actually faint. *How girly*, he thought. "Right, those clothes," he said, pulling away.

"Right," said Peter, pausing to see what Stefan was up to. Stefan unbuttoned his wet shirt and Peter pulled off his T-shirt. They shivered in the cold for a moment, then Peter reached for Stefan, who moved into his arms. The hug turned into a joking rock back and forth, which became an erotic twisting together.

"No," said Stefan, pulling away. Peter stood patiently, waiting. "You're not just anyone. I could *so* get naked with you right now, but I want to do this right. If we started right now, well," he grinned, "I'd get you all dirty."

"Ay, you're right, Ste. Me, too. Me, too. I like you—" He laughed. "I don't like you. 'Like' doesn't even begin to cover it. You're my imaginary friend, for fuck's sake. So what d'yeh have in mind? How do we do this right?"

Stefan got a shirt from his wardrobe for himself and threw a cosy jumper to Peter while he thought. "Do you want some pants?" he asked.

"Pants? Oh, *trousers*. 'Pants' are—" he unbuttoned his jeans and showed Stefan his underwear. Stefan's eyes followed the thin line of black hair down his chest.

"Stop that! We're not supposed to have sex until — what is it? — the third date. Isn't it something like that?"

"Okay," said Peter, "so we have to go on three dates tonight."

"Alright!" cheered Stefan. He sat on a wooden chair, while Peter put his towel down on the couch and sat there. "What should we do for the first date? Oh, I have an idea. Well, it's kinda silly."

"Whatever. Just say it," assured Peter.

"I've never had a proper date. Even my prom — my mother ruined it."

"What do you mean?"

"My mother is — oh, one thing first. Do you know who Delonia Mackechnie is?"

"Should I? She some relative of yours?" asked Peter.

"Oh, I could kiss you for that. And I will. Just not yet. Anyway, my mother was very proud that I liked boys, and thought it was important for me to make a political statement by taking a boy to my prom. But the only gay boy in my school was this big effeminate guy with this wavy blonde hair. He knew I was only taking him because my mother wanted to make a

point, and neither of us had ever spoken to each other before this. Then at the dance, he got sloppy drunk and kept trying to kiss me. I decided to leave, but he insisted on going with me. When we got to the parking lot, the whole hockey team was out there smoking up. Needless to say, they didn't like us. So they chased me and this fat guy in our tuxes across the football field into this swampy old river." Stefan sighed. "Needless to say, it was not the magical night I'd imagined for my prom."

"So let me make it up to you. We'll have a proper date."

"Deal."

"Do I have to get all dressed up?"

"Yes."

"Damn. Okay," said Peter, standing up. "Guess I should go and get ready then. I'll be back for you at eight o'clock. And the other two dates are my call."

"I trust you," said Stefan, "though I don't have any reason to yet."

"That's true. But you will." He went to the door and slipped his bare feet into his shoes. "Here," he said, squashing his socks into Stefan's hand. "You can hold my socks ransom. Of course, I get your jumper. But they're really good socks, so we're even."

"Wait," said Stefan. "Be careful. Make sure no one follows you. That phone belonged to someone who might have been killed, and there's an investigation on."

"How do you know that?"

"Um, I started the investigation. Sorry about that. You should be okay tonight, though. I'll try to sort it out when I get back to work tomorrow."

"Mm, that might not work."

"Why?"

"You'll be skiving off work tomorrow. Me, too."

"Oh. Okay."

Peter leaned over and kissed him. Their lips slid together, then he rested his cheek against Stefan's. Stefan had never known anything as intimate as the cold press of their skin as they paused there. His eyes looked over Peter's shoulder at the window. Drops of rain hung, frozen in their path toward the ground. Peter's heart pounded against his chest, beating strong enough for both of them. All time stopped but that rhythm. When Peter finally pulled away and went through the door, the drops resumed their fall and Stefan's heart started again.

~

Peter flipped the squeaky lid of the mail-slot several times instead of knocking, and Stefan immediately opened the door, which he'd been hovering near.

Peter wore a brown suit two sizes too big for him, but Stefan thought he looked handsome in it. His own suit was tailor-made for the awards ceremony he attended with his mother earlier in the year, back when this city was merely a dream and his mother paid people to date him. He pecked Peter quickly on the lips to say hello, overjoyed that he could already take such liberties with this citizen of his dream.

"Where are we going?" asked Peter as they left the tenement.

"No idea. I figure we'll just wander until we find a place that feels right. What kind of food do you like?"

"Well," said Peter, "I've been trying to eat better and learn to cook healthier since my dad took a heart attack last year."

"Oh, I'm sorry about that."

"Which, the food or my dad? Dad's fine. I'm not sure how I feel about the other."

"If it makes it any easier to decide, I'm a vegetarian. Kinda."

"What's that mean, kinda?"

"Except for bacon."

“Okay,” said Peter. “I know someplace that can make whatever you want. Down here.” He took Stefan’s elbow and guided him down a close so narrow that, walking side by side, their arms brushed against the rough granite bricks.

“Wait,” said Stefan, stopping under an old gas lamp that was refitted with an electric bulb. “I brought you something.”

“What?”

“This,” he said, and kissed Peter on the cheek. Peter rolled his eyes, and started walking again. Stefan felt embarrassed, and decided to play it cool the rest of the evening. No showy gestures, no acting goofy, and under no circumstances would he use the L-word, even though he was certain that he L-ed Peter already.

“Wait,” said Peter, putting a hand on Stefan’s chest. “I’m sorry, Ste, that was sweet. I brought you something, too.” Stefan waited, holding out his cheek. Peter punched him hard in the arm and ran off.

“Bastard!” yelled Stefan, running after him. His leather-soled dress shoes were unsteady on the hard, worn cobbles, and he found it difficult to keep up with Peter. They turned a corner onto a side road. Across the street in a doorway, sheltered from the last light of dusk, stood the familiar figure of the scratchman in his dark cloak and wide-brimmed hat. “Peter,” said Stefan under his breath, grabbing his arm and tugging him in the opposite direction.

“What?” He saw the scratchman, but kept walking. “That guy? Come on, he’s just standing there. He won’t bother us.”

“Peter, really, just—”

“No, Ste, the restaurant’s this way, and that’s the way I’m going.” They walked opposite the man now. Peter nodded to him and asked, “Alright?”

The scratchman looked confused and nodded back, for want of any other response.

Stefan nodded, too, and hurried past.

“I don’t know what you were worried about,” said Peter. “He didn’t seem terribly threatening. Actually, he looked pretty poorly to me.”

Stefan put his arm around Peter, and they continued up the road.

~

The restaurant was in a well-maintained Georgian hotel with antique furniture arranged beneath enormous paintings and mirrors hung in thick, ornately-carved gold frames. “Wow,” said Stefan, looking up at the patterns in the plaster ceiling.

“Hello,” said the head waiter, addressing Peter in a familiar tone.

“Hiya,” replied Peter, equally familiarly.

“I’d like a table, please. For two.” The waiter picked up two leather-bound menus and gestured for them to follow. Peter stopped him. “At the back,” he insisted.

“Oh yes, a special evening,” said the waiter quietly to Peter as they changed direction. He led them to a small room with heavy velvet curtains parted to expose large windows of antique glass like disquieted water. Through them was a large garden full of trees with yellow leaves that blazed in the lamplight.

They sat, and the waiter handed them their oversized menus. He left, and Stefan found himself wrestling with jealousy. The man was unthreateningly plain, yet Stefan felt uneasy about a stranger in public being so familiar with Peter. “So who’s he?” he finally asked.

“He’s the head waiter.”

“I figured that. But how do you know him?” Stefan worried that his suspicion was leaking out. He hated himself like this, and wished this were their six month anniversary, or even their second date, just so he could know it was going to turn out between them.

“I work here,” answered Peter.

“Oh,” said Stefan, and sighed, laughing.

“Would you like anything to drink?” asked the waiter, who’d returned silently.

“That sounds like a good idea,” said Stefan.

~

Supper was elegant, served on large plates drizzled with sauces and sprinkled with powders, followed by a similarly dressed dessert. They shared a bottle of wine as they tried to piece together an understanding of who each other was. Stefan briefly mentioned that his father had died, but avoided talking about his mother, turning the conversation back to Peter whenever they got close to the topic.

Peter’s parents were separated, he said. His mother lived in England now, but they didn’t hear much from her anymore. The children — himself and an older brother and sister — received pleasant birthday cards with not enough words in them each year. They figured she was remarried. His father, on the other hand, was still single, living in the same house Peter grew up in, on the outskirts of Edinburgh. It was part of a housing scheme, but the house was paid off. “You can’t beat that,” said Peter.

“No. No, you can’t,” said Stefan, self-consciously aware, without having seen the house, that his mother’s place would seem a mansion in comparison.

“So what brought you here?” asked Peter.

“Oh, it was my father’s idea,” he said, brushing the question aside.

“I thought you said your father was dead.”

“Right. Yes, I did. Well, you see, he wrote this play before he died, and... Let’s have another drink.” He gestured to the waiter. “I was kind of stuck in my life in Toronto, and I decided I wanted a change, to find something to do that seemed meaningful, and there was this play hidden in our attic, but the raccoons showed it to me first so I’d know it was there. And my father was with them. Oh, but first I got these notes.”

Peter looked confused. “Start over,” he said.

~

They walked hand in hand under the giant stone archway of the Cowgate. “So that bloke we saw tonight, he’s one of the—”

“Matholics, yes.”

“What do they want with you?”

“I don’t know. They seem to be worried I’m going to do something. At first it was the play, but, disruptive as that was, that wasn’t it.”

“So he’s after you for something you might do but don’t even know about?”

“Or something.”

“Well, we’ll just have to keep him away from you. Because whatever designs he or your father have on you, I’ve got some of my own. We didn’t meet after all this time for nothing.” He turned them up a steep street, then down the staircase of a basement bar. A neon sign of blue and green beside the door read “Dig Nation”. They clicked down the steps in their dress shoes and stepped into a smoky, vaulted space like a man-made cavern.

“What can I get you?” asked Peter, heading for the bar.

“A pint of eighty.”

Peter nodded, and turned to the bar. The woman working there raised her arms and jumped up to hug him. Music filled the air along with damp human heat, and Stefan couldn’t hear what Peter and the woman said to each other. Peter returned a moment later with their drinks.

“Who’s she?” asked Stefan above the noise.

“My sister.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. She works here. I work here, too. I work at the restaurant we went to tonight as an apprentice chef on a Saturday, and the rest of the time I’m a line-cook here.”

“Cool,” said Stefan. “That must be nice, working so close to your sister.”

“You *are* an only child, aren’t you?” He nodded toward the depths of the bar and tugged Stefan along with him. “My friends are here somewhere. They’re always here.” They ducked under a low brick archway and entered a small room at the back. There, around an old wooden table like something from a Viking ship, sat his friends on mismatched church pews. They waved to Peter when they saw him. Peter put his arm around Stefan and pointed to his friends in turn, speaking close into Stefan’s ear.

“Iain,” he said, indicating the stout, red-haired young man. “Rab,” he said, pointing out the tall, lanky, loud friend Stefan saw with him in Portobello. “And that one’s Calum,” he said, pointing to the handsome blond man at the end of the table, “watch him.”

“I think I could enjoy that.”

“Hey.”

“Don’t worry,” said Stefan, “he’s got nothing on you.”

“Cheers. Actually, if there’s anyone you need to watch, it’s Rab. He’s a good lad, but he’s a bit of a bampot.”

Stefan looked at him, puzzled.

“Crazy. But he’s alright.”

“Okay.”

Rab was holding court about an idea he’d had, but stopped to welcome Stefan. “So *you’re* him. Good to meet yeh. No bad, Peter me man.”

“Shut it,” said Peter. They sat with their drinks. “I had to ring him to explain why I didn’t show up this afternoon. I should have known better than to tell him anything.” Stefan didn’t mind: Peter talking to his friends about him was a good sign.

Peter’s sister came to their table. “Hey, Fi,” said Peter.

“So?”

“Ste, this is Fiona, my sister. Fi, this is Stefan Mackechnie.”

“Good Scots surname.”

“My dad’s from here.”

“Hey,” said Peter, “you just met my family. This is our second date.”

“Cool,” said Stefan.

“My dad’ll be at home, and my brother’s in Aberdeen. So Fiona’ll have to do.”

“Thanks,” she said, whipping him with her bar-towel.

“Och, get that minky thing away from me.” He turned to his friends. “So, what are you lads up to tonight?”

“Robert here thinks he found something interesting,” said Calum.

“I did, I tell you,” insisted Rab.

“And he’s got it in his head we should check it out,” said Iain, “but I think it’s a bad idea. We should just leave it alone.”

“What is it?” asked Peter.

“New development work,” said Rab. “This is the biggest bit yet. It’s a different developer, but it seems like the same kind of job.”

“I’d like to see what they’re up to,” said Peter.

“It’s easy enough to get to, and no security.”

“We don’t want to do this,” said Iain. “You know what happened the last time we went into one of those sites.”

“Yeah, Peter found himself a free mo—” Peter cut Rab off by elbowing him in the ribs.

“That site wouldn’t happen to have been developed by a Reginald Mackenzie, would it?” asked Stefan.

“He’s the one who died, isn’t he?” asked Iain.

“Yeah,” said Stefan, “and that’s whose phone you had, Peter. That’s why they were after you.”

“Thanks for getting me out of that.”

“Yeah. So what are these companies doing?”

“Some of them are doing renovations,” said Calum, “and others are restoring listed buildings.”

“I think they’re doing a really nice job,” said Iain. “Some of those buildings are in really bad shape. It’s dangerous, too. Bits keep falling off them onto people.”

“Yeah, but half of Edinburgh is covered in scaffolding,” said Peter. “It’s a city on crutches. And I don’t trust the companies that are getting these contracts. So where’s this place, Rab?”

“Guys, we shouldn’t,” said Iain.

“Come on, Rab’s been there. It’s safe, right, Rab?”

“Sure.”

“On we go, then.”

They left the bar, waving to Fiona as they went. Stefan followed the young men through the streets. The route took them around corners and down wynds he’d never seen before. They stood in a queue for twenty minutes to get into what turned out to be a basement dance club. Calum and Iain got drinks and leaned on a small, high table, watching while Peter and Stefan went to the dance floor. Rab flailed beside them for a while, then vanished, leaving them to laugh, dance, and make a sport of trying to touch each other in ways that wouldn’t be obvious to the others around them.

Rab reappeared and gestured to the others, who followed him off the dance floor to a hallway where a few people leaned against the brick walls, talking in drunken earnest to each other. Rab stood close to them, insinuating himself into their conversation. “So what’re we talking about?” asked Rab.

“What?”

“What’re we talking about? What’s your bird there greetin’ for?” he said, pointing to their female friend, who was crying, being consoled by another of them.

“None of your business, mate.”

“Hey, I’m just trying to be friendly. No need to get huffy.”

“Fuck off,” said the man. “Come on,” he said, and the group left the hallway.

“Perfecto,” said Rab. He went to the end of the now-empty hall, where boards were piled against the wall. He shifted them to either side, exposing an arched brick entrance. “Vaults,” he said.

“Someone should move those back after you go in,” said Iain.

“That’s right,” said Calum, “you stay here, shift them back after us, then maybe your mammy can come pick you up.”

“Hey, maybe I have a life and don’t want to go to jail just for looking at some mingin’ old building site.”

“Fair enough,” said Peter. “How about you make sure nobody follows us for a while, and I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay,” said Iain. Calum patted his round white cheek as he passed through the archway.

“Nice to meet you,” said Stefan, as he followed Peter and Rab in. He felt nervous, but tonight he’d follow Peter anywhere.

Rab clicked on the small torch he carried with him, evidently accustomed to doing this. Stefan was further surprised when Calum and Peter had small torches, too. This was not a first. The damp passageway was so dark that the small circles of light were a significant help.

They stopped at an intersection. First Rab led them to the left, where the passageway ended in a low room. He flicked his light the other way, and they followed him. The second route led into a space whose size they could feel more than they could see. The hall’s dampness gave way to an open, cold space so large its ceiling ate their torch-beams without revealing any details.

Rab vanished into a corner of the room, then with a loud click, burst into light, holding a hanging work-light plugged into a cable that snaked from the room. They looked up to see a vaulted cathedral-like ceiling.

"Wow," said Stefan.

All around them were construction materials — industrial power tools, boards, planks, giant pails of neutral-coloured paint, and endless sheets of glass.

"What do you think they're doing?" asked Rab.

"Something boring, no doubt," quipped Calum.

"Should we wreck it?" asked Peter. Stefan looked at him, surprised. "Not the room, I mean, just their shite."

Another light bobbed on the opposite side of the room. "Rab!" hissed Peter. "Kill the light!" A second later, the work-light switched off, along with each of their torches, and a new, larger torch-light bounced into the room. It faintly lit a private security guard.

"Who's in here?" he demanded.

"He's got a dog," whispered Stefan.

"It's just a little terrier," said Calum.

"I'm going out past him," said Rab. "You guys go back to the club." Before they could reply, Rab jumped to his feet and yelled at the top of his lungs. The terrier barked madly and chased after Rab as he ran through the room, rushing by the security guard. The other three turned and ran back as fast as they could.

The darkness suddenly turned white for Stefan, and he fell backward to the ground. His face felt hot. It took him a moment to realise he'd run into a low-hanging piece of masonry. "Peter," he called. A moment later, Peter was beside him, helping him up. They heard the man's yelling and dog's barking getting fainter as they moved further away after Rab.

Peter put his arm around Stefan and they made their way back to the club by the light of Peter's small torch. Calum left the boards open, and neither he nor Iain were anywhere to be seen. Peter took Stefan to the toilet and dashed to the bar, returning with a bar-towel filled with ice. He found Stefan looking at his face in the mirror. The eyebrow above his right eye had already swollen to Cro-Magnon proportions and bled onto his shirt. "Here," said Peter, handing him the ice. Stefan put it carefully to his head.

"I'm sorry for taking you down there. That was stupid," said Peter. He moved Stefan's hand to look at the damage. "Ouch." He leaned over and gave Stefan's forehead the lightest of kisses. Stefan pouted and pointed to his mouth. Peter kissed him on the mouth.

"Actually," said Stefan, a smile creeping across his face, "that was kind of cool."

"One more date," said Peter. He led Stefan from the club. A block away, Stefan realised he still had the bar-towel. "Oh, they said you could keep that."

"Did they really?"

"No," said Peter. He led them across town, to the entrance to Calton Hill. "Come on," he said.

"What for?"

"Our third date."

Stefan wasn't sure what he had in mind, but followed him. His head throbbed, but didn't ache, as they climbed the steps and walked up to the small gathering of Roman buildings there. Stefan was relieved Peter didn't lead him back to the paths, but to a monument like the giant concrete urn of a titan. They sat on its base and looked up over the city, where a dirty plate of a moon rested in the sky, then looked out over the roofs, spires, arches, walls, and castle of the Old Town, over the blocky Georgian buildings of the New Town, then out to the cranes and bridges in the distance by the water of the Forth.

Stefan took Peter's hand. "I think you're okay," he said.

"Yeah, you too," said Peter, "I'm gonna ask my dad if I can keep you." He kissed him. "That's three dates."

"I guess we can mess around now."

"Your place is closer," said Peter. "How's your head?"

“Suddenly it’s feeling a lot better.”

“Brilliant. Think you can run?”

Stefan leapt up and grabbed Peter’s hand, pulling him up to his feet. They ran toward the moon, heading home.

Chapter Sixteen

Hobosexuals

An electric buzz pulled Stefan backward out of a dream. While trying to open his gluey eyes, he leaned over to hit the “Snooze” button on his alarm-clock.

“Ugh!” said a voice. Stefan’s eyes opened fully, and he saw Peter pinned beneath his elbow.

“Sorry,” whispered Stefan. Peter groaned and went back to sleep. Stefan studied him. His face was so simple like this, almost unrecognisable without some expression animating it.

He put his head down on the thin patch of hair in the middle of Peter’s chest. He felt uncomfortably unmanly, damsel-like, doing this, but he had the courage in that moment to surrender. The last time he could remember feeling so comfortable, he was in his mother’s arms. To his surprise, he missed her.

He lifted his head again and traced a finger down Peter’s chest. Peter laughed softly with his eyes closed and smiled. Stefan pulled the sheets down to look at the rest of him. It felt odd having this license with another man’s body, and he wasn’t going to waste the opportunity. He lightly stroked Peter’s penis, which moved, more awake than its owner. Peter made a pleased noise. Stefan looked with curiosity at the extra skin Peter had there. He remembered his father telling him once in a swimming pool change room of Delonia’s horror when she learned that the doctors had circumcised her baby, according to the custom at the time in Canada.

He stroked Peter with more vigour, but, determined to keep sleeping, Peter wrapped his arms around Stefan and pulled him close to his chest to make him stop. Stefan sighed and fell asleep.

The clock buzzed again half an hour later, and Stefan turned it off. He remembered it was Friday and he was supposed to be at work. Peter told him to take the day off and he’d agreed, but he hadn’t informed the office about this.

He rolled from the bed and felt around for his shorts. He had trouble finding them: the curtains were drawn, the room was dark, and their undressing the night before was hurried. He turned on the lamp to see better, but had to look no further, as his underpants hung from the lampshade. He put them on — new ones would come after he’d had his shower, and he wanted Peter for that — and pulled on enough other clothes to go outside. After slipping his bare feet into his shoes, he tiptoed back to Peter, kissed him on the cheek, then went out.

He searched the street for a pay-phone, not having used them before, and found one three blocks away. It was a tall, clear plastic box like a soft drink fridge, covered in logos for the very company he was calling. He preferred the old-fashioned red telephone booths, but they were increasingly hard to find. After dropping in his money, he listened carefully, half-expecting to hear what Peter was dreaming, but smiled when he heard nothing but a dial-tone. He rang his line manager’s direct number and put on his best stuffed-nose voice.

He told her who it was, and said good morning. “You sound awful,” she said. He smiled: he still had it. A lorry rumbled by, and his smile dropped. *Busted*. “Where are you?” she asked.

He coughed and sniffed while strategising. He decided to go with the truth, but to make it sound pathetic. “I don’t have a phone. I had to go outside to find one.” He pinched himself under the nose until he sneezed.

“Get back home! Stay in bed all weekend, and come back on Monday if you’re feeling better.”

Staying in bed all weekend sounded just fine to him.

“When you come back, the Directors want to hear your report about that missing mobile. I saw someone from Tech go up to talk to them on Thursday. That’s a first! But don’t worry about that. Just get yourself better, and we’ll see you when we see you.”

“Thanks so much,” said Stefan. “Bye bye.” Horror crept over him as he wondered what the Directors had been told, and how much, if any, the Tech team saw of his intervention with Peter. His worry was soon replaced by an eagerness to get back to the flat.

The next two days were filled with conversation, naps punctuated with actual sleeping, sex, and the occasional foray into the kitchen area, where they scrambled to put meals together from the incompatible things on Stefan’s shelves. Their last meal attempt, “Mustard Rice”, was so unpalatable they decided it was time to go out. They treated themselves to a big meal that cost more than they intended to spend, then walked home in a light mist, holding hands whenever they cut through a close or a courtyard.

~

“I’ve got to go,” said Stefan, tightening his tie. “No!” he insisted, as Peter pulled him back toward the bed. When he got free of Peter’s grip, he sprang onto the bed and wrestled with him, taking advantage of his vulnerable naked opponent.

“Okay, go,” said Peter, pushing him away.

“Right. Okay. I’m going,” he said, heading for the door. “I am leaving. I’m going to leave now. When I leave, you’re not going to see me for hours and hours. Any last words you want to say to me?”

“Yes,” said Peter, “I’ve been meaning to tell you this for a while now.” He sat up in bed. “You’re out of milk.”

Stefan gave an exasperated sigh and left the flat. The whole ride to work, he wondered if people could tell he was in love. He felt himself grinning unconsciously. Did they see his “I’ve had sex” look? He didn’t care, he thought, yet he wanted everyone to know.

He looked at the other people on the bus. Their faces were long, expressionless. He supposed that most of them were in relationships, and some had sex on the weekend. The idea was unimaginable for most of them, that this person had the capacity to romp nakedly and have sexual desires.

This thing you have, he thought, *it’s what you wanted, isn’t it?* It was certainly *something* he’d wanted, he knew that. Every aquarium cleaner, escort, or anonymous clerk he’d pined for was nothing compared to the kinship he felt in Peter.

But it’s not salvation, is it?

That’s what he’d asked his father for. He’d heard Peter’s voice long before writing to his father. He had no doubt he was meant to meet Peter. His father’s plans facilitated their meeting but he didn’t suppose that was the whole plan. In love or no, he still had to go to work, to participate in an organisation whose workings and aims were completely foreign to him and which was indifferent to him. He recalled what he used to say in spite: “Romance is not salvation”. Now that he had a love for himself, he realised it was true, and that struck him as sad. Surely love was more than just a distraction encouraged by songs. He had no doubt it had the potential to change him. And it made him the happiest he’d been since childhood. But he still felt a responsibility to something bigger. Looking at the defeated faces of the other riders, he wondered if they’d shirked some responsibility of their own at some point. If they had love, were they even interested in it anymore?

He committed himself to being an exception to their rule. Peter was a wonder, and he would never forget it. And his work life... The thought of facing the Directors filled him with dread. He couldn’t imagine any way for his meeting with them to go well.

~

A cold draught and the musty smell of old, wet books pervaded the room. Stefan wasn’t sure if it came from the walls or from the Directors themselves.

“Your report,” demanded the tall director in the centre in a slow and careful tone.

“I believe the police have found the phone.”

“Yes. They have.”

“So that’s that, then.”

“The question, Mister Mackechnie, was as much about the keeper of the telephone as it was about its whereabouts.”

Stefan tried to deflect the scrutiny from himself. “When I left on Thursday, Tech looked like they were about to find whoever had the phone. Didn’t they?”

“No, they did not. The thief seemed to have been informed at the last moment. And yes, what is this I hear about you leaving your post without authorisation? I am afraid,” he turned to look at the other directors on either side of him, “we find that unacceptable. Combined with this fraud suspect managing to learn somehow about our investigation and then eluding you — I am afraid the whole situation has become untenable.” He leaned forward. Stefan was sure he heard an audible creaking noise. “I am afraid we’re going to have to send you to the workhouses.” The squat little director to his right leaned in and whispered something. “I am afraid,” corrected the director, “that we must terminate your employment here.”

“Oh,” said Stefan. He wasn’t surprised at the decision, though he was shocked to be fired for the first time in his life. “I guess I’ll go collect my things.”

“You have ten minutes to leave the building. Should you fail to vacate the premises, we will hunt you.”

“Right,” said Stefan. “Well, you all take care.” He started toward the door, but halted, and went to the window. “You know, it’s really stuffy in here. You really should have more light.” He tore open the heavy drapes, letting in a wide column of white sunshine. As he left, he heard the directors shrieking.

~

Stefan frantically scrolled through the orange screens of data, deleting line after line of information about the stolen mobile.

“What’s up?” asked his line manager.

“Oh,” he said, startled, “just tidying up,” he answered, turning off the screen.

“And the cardboard box?”

“Ah, well, it’s not really working out for me here. The Directors and I decided it would be best if I left.”

“Oh.” Over the manager’s shoulder, Stefan saw a squad of people in beige uniforms running toward the Directors’ offices, carrying fire blankets and buckets of sand.

“I guess I should get going. Thanks for all your help.” More beige figures headed in his direction. Stefan dropped his cardboard box. “Bye!” he said, and ran.

~

“What am I going to do?” asked Stefan.

Peter turned around on the bed, shifting the bills and bank statements. “I don’t know, Ste.”

Stefan searched his flat. “There’s got to be something here I can sell. I’ve got to make rent.”

“What about this CD player?”

“It plays okay, but it’s cracked.”

“Hm,” said Peter, and continued looking around the bed. He picked up a small box made of near-black mahogany, covered in tiny etched patterns. “What about this?”

The Voice Box. “Oh, I don’t know.”

“Why? What is it?”

“It’s something my mother gave me before I left. A Voice Box.”

“What?” Peter turned it around and examined it. “What’s it do?”

"No idea. I think it must be pretty valuable. But I don't know if I can sell it. See, my mother is a singer. She's kind of famous. And I used to do voices for cartoons and commercials and stuff, so we kind of had this voice thing between us. She said I should open it when I've had a change of heart."

"You shouldn't sell it then."

"I guess it is just an object. And it might get a good price. But selling it—"

"Hey, I know! Pawn it. There's this shop I used to go to as a kid, if it's still there. Miserable bastard owned it. We used to take in stuff we'd got a hold of, and sometimes he'd buy it. We could bring your box there and pawn it, then you can get it back when you've got the dosh again."

Stefan took the box from him. It didn't feel right, but he decided he had no other choice.

~

"It's from Peru, Mister Kreel," said Peter to the pawn-shop owner. Kreel pulled up the sleeves of his patched green cardigan, took the box, and held it to the light. His eyes were far apart; he had to show the box to one eye, then the other.

Stefan looked at Peter. *Peru?* he mouthed. Peter winked.

"It's something very rare called a Voice Box," continued Peter.

"What's it do?"

"You can," he leaned on the counter and waved a hand at the object while he searched his mind for an explanation. One popped into his head as he looked at it. "You can carry a song in this box. When someone needs that song most, the box opens up and makes everything better."

The shop-keep looked closer at it. Peter turned to Stefan and shrugged.

"How do ah open it?"

"Well, that's the trick, isn't it? You have to be the one who's meant to hear it. Besides, you're not exactly in trouble, are you?" He leaned back. "It's a kind of puzzle. I don't know if you could work it out."

Kreel grumbled. "How much d'yeh want for it?"

"How much are you willing to offer?"

"How much d'yeh want?"

"Three hundred quid."

Kreel laughed and handed the box back.

"Two hundred pounds," said Stefan.

Kreel smacked his lips as if chewing cold porridge. "One-fifty."

Stefan sighed. That wouldn't pay his rent. It was something, though. "Okay."

Kreel went to a small safe behind him and pulled open its two-inch door. From a heavy canvas bag, he took a roll of money and peeled off some bills. He closed the safe and handed Stefan the money. With great difficulty, he penned a number onto each half of a perforated ticket, and tore one half off for Stefan.

"Thank you," said Peter, putting an arm around Stefan and leading him out of the shop. Stefan looked at the ticket in his hand, and the shaky numbers on it like characters of a foreign script.

"Don't worry," said Peter, "we'll get it back in no time."

But Stefan was worried. He looked back into the shop, watching Kreel shake the box then put it to his ear.

~

Autumn had arrived. Stefan walked through the town, as he had done each day for the past week to pass the time. Today, he finally put his finger on what the change was. It came on so

slowly it was barely perceptible. But now he saw it: the colour was gone. Every surface had been leached of its hue, from the sky to the rough brick of the buildings to the earth. The city was an antique stereoscope picture and he was inside it.

He descended the steps of Dig Nation, where he was to meet Peter at the end of his lunchtime shift. "Hey there," said Fiona as he entered.

"Hiya."

"How you doing?" she asked. From the sympathy in her voice he guessed that Peter told her everything. He wondered how far that sibling communication went, what other sorts of things he told her about.

"I'm doing okay. Just taking it day by day." He smiled, but it was an effort. The first of the month was coming, and he had little money left. It bothered him to consider how much he had in the bank just a season ago. Poverty was new to him and it was not comfortable. Worry drained the enjoyment from circumstances he knew he should be enjoying.

"Is Peter here?"

"Yeah," said Fiona, "I'll tell him you've come for him."

A moment later, Peter appeared from the kitchen, untying his apron and lifting it over his head. He raised a section of the bar and walked through to give Stefan a hug. He lifted Stefan's chin with his thumb. "That bad, eh?" Stefan shrugged. "Okay, come with me, miseryguts."

He draped his apron over the bar. "Hand me my jacket, will you, Fi? I'll be back in time for the supper crowd. If anyone comes in, we've still got some jacket potatoes and the cold rolls."

"Alright," she said, "but if you're not back in time I'll kill you. I am not going into that kitchen."

"Okay," he agreed. The chill of the afternoon hit them as they left the bar, and they walked close together as Peter led them across town. Stefan told Peter about his worries. He confessed his old rate of pay on *The Green Brigade*, and divulged how much he had in the bank when he'd first come to the country. He knew Peter had never known that kind of money, and felt awkward about that disparity in their lives.

Peter didn't make it easier for him. "And you spent that all on a play? Which is now over."

"I think it's still running somewhere in Spain. Or maybe they've moved on by now." He sighed. "I know. It made sense at the time."

"Here we are," said Peter. He led them down a path lined with shrivelled trees and winterised flower-beds. He pointed at a series of huge glass buildings ahead. Their steamy windows held in a blaze of vibrant green. Peter paid their admission, and they walked into a room whose air was rich and clean, with the heavy, moist feel of breath. Ferns covered the ground and palms rose to the glass roof.

Peter took them over a walkway into another room that contained a pond. They sat on its edge and Stefan reached for one of the huge, leathery green lily-pads, pulling it close.

"I know how you can get rid of this rent problem," said Peter.

"How? Sell my blood?" He raised an eyebrow. "My sperm?"

"No," laughed Peter, "move in with me."

Stefan stared at him. This thought had never occurred to him; he wouldn't have dared entertain it. "Really?"

Peter put his hand around the back of Stefan's neck. "Really."

"What do I tell my landlord?"

"Well, there are good excuses and bad excuses."

"What's the difference?"

"A bad excuse is boring."

~

The landlord watched quietly as they moved the last of Stefan's things from the flat. When Stefan handed him his keys, the man shook his hand and said, "I'm so sorry, son. So young. But don't you mind the statistics. Yeh'll find a donor yet."

Stefan nodded a solemn *thank you*, and headed down the stairs. Peter closed the back doors, and they got in. The landlord waved as they pulled away. Peter's laugh spluttered out of his lips as they turned the corner.

"You're a bad influence on me," said Stefan.

"Hey, you were going to break your lease anyway. Nothing's any different than it would have been, except now this guy thinks he did you a big favour."

"You're still a bastard."

Peter smiled.

Fiona met them at the door of their flat and helped them carry Stefan's bags and boxes upstairs. "Like I don't see enough of my brother, now I've got to deal with you, too," she said.

In his best schoolboy voice, Stefan said, "Thank you, Fiona."

"And you're not getting off easy, boyo," she said to Peter. "Whatever he pays is coming off my share of the mortgage, too."

"Okay."

Peter pointed to a closed door. "That's where Sarah stays. Except she doesn't. She made it big working with a firm in London and she's never here anymore. But she likes to keep a place here because Edinburgh's home. It works for us." He pointed to another room whose door was also closed. He whispered as he pointed, "She Who Must Not Be Named. Do not cross her path. Should you see her outwith her room, do not, I repeat, do not make eye contact with her."

"What's her name?"

"Oh no no no. Don't," said Peter, "don't think you're going to have some special influence and tame her. Many have tried. Many have failed."

They moved down the hall. "Fiona's hardly ever here, either," he continued. "She's usually at her boyfriend's with the bairn. When they're here, they're in the bedroom. So we've pretty much got the run of the place."

"No you don't," called Fiona from somewhere else.

"And we can have sex on every single surface in this flat."

"No you can't."

"Come on, let's figure out where to put all your stuff."

~

"Where do these go?" asked Stefan, carrying a tray of clean pint-glasses. The bar couldn't take him on as a paid employee, but if he volunteered there, the owners didn't mind him eating whenever he wanted.

"Just over there," said Peter, pointing behind the bar. On the other side of the bar a young man sat down, wearing khaki trousers and a T-shirt silk-screened with the image of a South American revolutionary. "Be right back," said Peter, leaving Stefan.

"Hi there," he said to the customer, crossing from behind the bar.

"Hi. I'll have a—"

"Just a quick question first."

"Who's that on your shirt?"

"Uh, Che Guevara."

"Ah. You're a fan of his?"

"Well—"

"I was just wondering if you could remind me what country he died in."

"Um—"

“Seems to me he wrote three books. Don’t suppose you could name any of them for me, could you?”

“Uh—”

“Yeah. And what was his real name?”

“I don’t—”

“Get out of here!” shouted Peter. He grabbed the boy’s coat and handed it to him, then booted him playfully toward the door. “Posing little wanker. Out!”

“So,” he said, returning to Stefan, “you want to try what I’ve made for lunch?”

~

Stefan woke up with an urgent need to pee. He climbed over Peter, pulled on some shorts, and padded out to the hallway. As he passed by the nameless flatmate’s door, he stopped and tried to look in. A lone eye flashed in the doorway, and the door slammed shut. Fiona’s door was open, and he saw her son sleeping there in his white wooden prison of a cot. He continued toward the toilet.

The door was locked. He heard Fiona giggle, then her boyfriend’s low voice and the splash of water. They both started to groan, and he heard a rhythmic banging against the tub. He hopped back and forth on his feet. He tried to imagine going back to bed, but he knew he wouldn’t last that long.

He padded to the kitchen and looked around. There was nothing big enough to hold all the liquid inside him. Frantic, he tiptoed at the kitchen counter and urinated into the sink.

“Heya,” said a voice behind him. Horrified, he turned his head and saw Peter. “Oh,” said Peter. “That looks like fun.” Peter stood beside him, a few inches taller, pulled down his underpants, and joined Stefan in peeing.

“That’s the evil flatmate’s favourite cup,” he said, adjusting his aim.

“I love you,” said Stefan.

Peter laughed, finished, and went back to bed.

Stefan guiltily and thoroughly washed the dishes, then joined him.

Hours later, the alarm clock buzzed. Peter groaned, rolled onto Stefan, and turned it off. “Hey you,” he said. “My brother’s getting married next weekend, and his fiancée asked me if I had anybody special I wanted to bring. I thought you would do. Wanna go?”

Stefan smiled.

Chapter Seventeen

Heathered Moon

Peter put his suit-bag into the boot on top of Stefan's. His had what looked like a sleeping bag compartment on the bottom. "What's that?" asked Stefan.

"That's for my kilt," replied Peter.

"Really? You're wearing a kilt?"

"Sure. My dad bought it for me yonks ago. Barry'll be wearing his, too."

"Ooh, I'm gonna like this," said Stefan. He was about to make a lewd comment, but Fiona stuffed her baby into his arms.

"Hold him," she said. "Oh, and if it looks like he's going to throw up — I dunno, just hold him away from you."

Stefan looked at the wriggling little person in his arms. The baby's eyes were sparkling and blue like blown glass, and stared with a soul-piercing intensity Stefan found unnerving.

"Everybody in," said Roddy, Fiona's boyfriend. "If I push it, we can get there in two hours."

Peter folded himself into the back seat of Roddy's tiny French car — much like a refrigerator box painted red and given wheels. Stefan handed him the baby, which Peter strapped into the small plastic seat between them. Fiona and Roddy got into the front seats. Roddy slid his chair back on its rails.

"Oi!" cried Peter.

"Sorry, I gotta have room for me legs, or they'll fall asleep." Peter looked at Stefan and rolled his eyes. Between them, the baby's head rolled as if on waves, then it burped loudly.

Fiona turned around. "Something he ate isn't agreeing with him. You'll probably need this." She handed him a small yellow towel that was already moist with something. The baby looked at him, smiled, then made a distressed face and brought up a trickle of thin, smelly liquid.

"Let's go!" said Roddy.

~

"How's everyone doing?" asked Roddy, then leaned to his right to blow smoke out the open window. The smoke promptly curled backward on the wind into the rear of the car.

"I need to pee," said Peter

"I'm hungry," added Stefan.

"Pull off the motorway up ahead, and we'll find a pub," instructed Fiona, exercising some unspoken authority as the driver's girlfriend.

The town was tiny, and Stefan thought it charming, with its few small buildings and the view across the water to the massive green angles of island-mountains. They stopped in front of the tiny stone post office and got out of the metal box, groaning and stretching. Next door was a low building with a pebbled, whitewashed front and large windows of rippled glass. A hanging sign for one of the national breweries marked it out as a pub.

"I'll be in in a minute," said Roddy. The others went in, toting the baby, seat and all, because it was easier to remove the seat from the car than the baby from the seat's buckles. They ordered drinks, then the waiter returned and asked if they knew what they wanted to eat.

"I'll go ask Roddy," said Stefan, eager to be as helpful and useful as possible, still overjoyed about being invited to a family function. He bounded from his seat through the heavy black front door of the pub. "Roddy—?" he started, but stopped when he stepped into a cloud of something that he didn't recognise, but knew was not cigarette smoke.

Roddy took a long last drag of whatever was concealed in his hand and spoke, his voice a cartoon bubble of smoke: "Yeah?"

“What do you want for lunch?” asked Stefan, not sure what else to say. As the child of musician parents, he wasn’t unaccustomed to people who used drugs. He just didn’t like the idea of being chauffeured by them.

Roddy spent much of lunch laughing at the objects hung on the pub’s walls. Fiona didn’t notice, too busy tending to the baby, whom she tried, unsuccessfully, to feed morsels of her own lunch.

“Peter,” whispered Stefan, tapping Peter’s arm gently. Fiona and Roddy looked at him. The pub was quiet. In the distance, a television showed a rugby match, but the sound was off. Peter raised his eyebrows. “Uh, nothing,” said Stefan.

They paid their bill at the bar and shoved themselves back into the car. Roddy started the engine and they pulled away.

The route took them along a narrow trunk road that twisted along the side of a loch. A forest lined the other side of the road.

Stefan clung to his seat with one hand, while his other held on to the baby-seat, as if he would be able to hold it there should anything go wrong. *Why is the baby somehow more important than the rest of us?* he wondered. He pictured a yellow hazard sign on the back windscreen: *Frightened voice-over artist on board*. He’d been in a car several times with his mother when she shouldn’t have driven, yet somehow they never acted out the public service announcement version of drunk driving. He felt he should be courageous and challenge Roddy, taking charge of the car himself. That scenario played out badly in his mind: He’d never driven on this side of the road. No, it would have to be Fiona or Peter—

The car swung around a tight corner. Stefan grabbed the baby’s towel and threw up on it himself.

~

“You look awful,” said Peter, putting a hand on Stefan’s shoulder. He turned back to the clerk on the desk who was checking guests into the manor. “Yes, it’s ‘Hailes’, I’m the groom’s brother.”

“It says two here,” said the clerk.

“Yeah, me and him.”

“Oh.” The man paused, then handed Peter a set of long brass keys.

“C’mon, Ste, let’s get you upstairs.” He picked up their bags and they climbed the stairs to a large, open landing with an antique table that held a large vase erupting with flowers. Stefan stopped and looked at himself in a gilt-framed mirror on the wall. “Yeah,” said Peter, “you look a tad peely-wally. I didn’t know you got carsick.”

“I’ll be fine now that I’m not trapped in a car with *your sister’s stoned boyfriend!*”

“Oh,” said Peter, unlocking their door, “was he—?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know. He’s always like that.” He dropped the bags on the bed and looked around the suite. From the bathroom, Stefan heard him say “Wow.” He poked his head around the corner. “I think you need to have a bath.”

“Okay,” said Stefan, smiling. He joined Peter in the bathroom, where perched on lion’s feet was the largest bathtub he’d ever seen. Peter cranked open the large brass taps, and Stefan quickly pulled off his clothes, then grabbed at Peter’s.

“Easy, tiger.”

“Well hurry up!”

“You seem to be feeling better now.”

Naked, they climbed into the tub, but the water, hot as it was, seemed like it would never be able to fill the tub. They knelt, holding each other, rubbing each other’s backs. They kissed. Both hard now, they alternated between tugging at each other and holding each other close, grabbing one another’s backs and backsides.

“Forget this!” said Stefan, and climbed out of the tub. Peter followed, yelling in the cold air, screwing the taps closed. They ran, dripping, across the room. Stefan yanked the covers back on the bed, they both jumped in, and Stefan pulled the heavy covers back on top of them. They squirmed close and wrapped themselves around each other. Peter’s squirming became rhythmic, and Stefan joined him. To his surprise, he felt that old familiar tingling already. “I’m gonna come!” he said through clenched teeth.

“Go on, I’m right with you.”

Stefan came quietly, laughing. Peter arched back and grunted loudly. Stefan wouldn’t have been surprised if he turned into a werewolf. But his animal noises gave way to a tiny squeak of pleasure as Stefan felt hot wetness shoot up his chest. He laughed.

“What?” said Peter, his body relaxing now, all traces of animal gone.

“Nothing,” giggled Stefan, “come here,” he said, and pulled his lover against him. In moments, he found his thoughts slipping through time and space, stitching together disparate things. He dreamt briefly that he was at home in his basement bedroom, hearing his mother singing upstairs. Then he was in the gym of his high school, dancing awkwardly with a girl at arm’s length while the other couples looked like they were trying to walk through each other. He looked back from the others to find he was dancing with Peter. A teacher stood on the stage and interrupted the band — who happened to be a young hippy act called Delonia and Robert Mackecknie — and made an announcement: they couldn’t leave because there was a terrible snowstorm outside. To prove his point, he opened a side door, and a raging white cloud burst in and completely surrounded him. When the door hissed shut again, he was gone. Peter looked at Stefan, shrugged, and they kept on dancing.

~

A knock at the door woke them up. “Peter!” yelled someone. To Stefan it sounded like “Pee-uh.”

“One minute,” Peter said, dropping out of the bed. He ran to the bathroom and came back wrapped in a big white towel. He opened the door. In the hallway stood someone who was unmistakably Peter’s father. He had Peter’s black brush of hair, but had it combed back carefully with some kind of oil in a style he’d likely worn since the early Sixties. He was slightly shorter than Peter, and his distended belly made his son look reedy by comparison, particularly as Peter wore only a towel, ribs and slight muscles bound beneath shockingly white skin that contrasted with the rose of his father’s face.

“Hey, Da,” said Peter, “come on in.”

Stefan, horrified, tried to make himself invisible by burrowing under the covers.

“Is Ste with you?” asked Peter’s father. “I thought I was going to get to meet him.”

“Yeah, he’s here, he’s just being strange,” said Peter, and thumped the blankets.

“Show yourself.”

Stefan eased himself up carefully, curling his head and arms over the covers, trying to look as un-naked as possible. “Hello, Mister Hailes,” said Stefan, “nice to meet you.” He extended a hand while carefully holding the covers with his other.

“Och, call me John.” He took the proffered hand and shook it. He sat down on the bed between the two young men. “Well this *is* quite the day. Your mother would have been well surprised.” Peter warned Stefan in advance about his father’s tendency to speak of his mother in the past tense. Listeners often made the mistake of thinking she was dead and apologised to Peter.

“How’s Barry doing?” asked Peter.

“Oh, you know him. Who can tell? He seems calm enough.”

“And Christine?”

“I like that girl. She’s really good for your brother, you know? But her parents,” he said, looking at the ceiling. “Och. You should see the kirk. Well, you will. It’s ridiculous.

There are so many flowers and decorations — it's more like a bloody parade than a wedding. But that's what they wanted, and they were willing to pay for it. Bloody Sassenachs."

Stefan looked at Peter. "English people," Peter explained.

"Anyway," said John, standing up from the bed, "it's ten o'clock. You two best get yourselves ready. Ste, pleasure to meet you." He slapped Stefan playfully on the shoulder and left.

"I like him," pronounced Stefan.

"Yeah, well don't get designs on him. You're mine."

"Okay," he said, falling backward on the bed with his arms open.

~

John wasn't exaggerating, thought Stefan, looking around the old kirk. Its stone features and carved wooden pews were strewn with enormous purple valences and floral geysers. In his hand, he held a programme made of paper that felt like the starched sheets of last night's bed. Its pages were printed with calligraphy so ornate it was nearly illegible. "Hymns?" he said, turning to Peter. "I *don't* sing."

"Don't worry," said Peter, "I don't know about any of this stuff, either."

Stefan looked around at the other guests. Nearly all the women wore elaborate, pastel-coloured hats. They were huge, and obscured the heads of the wearers with their enormous brims and crashing surfs of fine mesh. The men all wore dark, drab suits, though he noticed that those on the other side of the kirk were better-tailored.

Organ music started, and all the heads turned in formation to look back to the door of the church. Four enormous men entered first. If not for their formal jackets and kilts, Stefan would have thought they were the security. They walked stiffly to the front of the church and arranged themselves in a row.

Next came four young women. The first three were tall and pretty, like muses in their variations on a dark purple dress. The fourth followed them. Her makeup was just as softly applied, her hair piled in equally complex layers, but her general shortness and roundness evoked a wordless sympathy from the watchers. Perhaps in her own element she might have had a charm of some kind, but putting her into a set with the other three seemed unfair.

John Hailes followed next. He wore a nice suit, likely hired for the occasion, but he looked past his prime, particularly next to the man who walked with him. The man looked like Peter, but built to a larger scale. He was taller, his jaw wider and more rugged, his shoulders twice as broad — everything about him like a heroic version of Peter.

"That's Barry," whispered Peter.

"Yeah, I figured that," replied Stefan. Looking at Peter, he appreciated that he was happier with the brother he got. Looking back at Barry, he laughed to himself: not as if Barry would ever be on offer.

Finally, Christine entered with her parents. The parents were dressed elegantly and appropriately for their age. Her mother wore a butter yellow suit with a huge matching hat like a felt sombrero. Her father wore a grey morning suit with gloves. Christine was a dowry in herself, her peachy face under a penumbra of soft brown hair with a pearl tiara nestled in it. Her long silk gown was covered in shiny filaments punctuated with pearls. The intended effect had been achieved: everyone else in the room looked like a mollusc next to this daughter of pearl. The sun shone through the stained glass window behind her, dappling her dress with colours and making a halo of her hair. As she walked up the aisle, the guests gasped.

She reached the front and joined Barry, while her parents moved to one side. A priest stood there, though no one knew where he'd arrived from, having been too busy watching Christine. He welcomed them to the town, to the kirk, and explained — for anyone who might be confused — why they were there. He then indicated that they should open their hymn books to sing.

They stood, and Stefan followed with his eyes in the hymnal Peter held open for them. Peter sang, not well, but admirably. Stefan refused. He knew how to read music, taught from an early age by Delonia in case he wanted to join their act someday, but he didn't sing. He felt panicked, completely unaccustomed to Christian proceedings. Even his father's funeral had not been held in a church, but was a makeshift affair involving lots of music, a theatrical procession, and, at one point, the police: apparently Canada had strict laws about human bodies that their two-day wake-funeral violated.

The organ music and the voices around him stopped, and they sat down. The priest then delivered a sermon on marriage and its importance as the glue of a healthy community. He spoke of the importance of families, such as those represented here (which made Peter's father appear as if he'd had something amputated), and warned against the dangers of following modern perversions wearing the disguises of tradition.

Stefan grabbed Peter's hand and squeezed it. Peter squeezed back.

There were those, the man continued, who felt the church was in decline because of its adherence to tradition. But these lies — lies that had infiltrated the church itself — were part of a never-ending attempt on the part of the wicked to attack the most sacred, most fundamental—

"I can't listen to this," whispered Stefan into Peter's ear. He vibrated with rage.

Peter squeezed his hand intently, added his other hand, and looked at him. "Stay," he whispered. "Please. Stay with me. Don't mind him."

Perhaps it didn't matter what the man said, he thought. Here he was with Peter, and he felt no doubt about their right to exist there together. He looked at John Hailes beside the altar. He looked back toward them both, smirked, and rolled his eyes. With one silly gesture, he undermined the authority in the ornate robes and supplanted it with his own approval, which meant the world to Stefan.

He looked around. He wouldn't have been surprised to see his father here. But he wasn't. He wondered about the Matholics. Did they perform weddings? What would they be like? Would they marry him and Peter? It was legal for two men to get married in Canada and in Scotland. He wondered if the Matholics even had any — *What would they be called, "branches"?* — in Britain.

Barry and Christine kissed. Stefan didn't know how much he'd missed, but didn't mind. The wedding party was soon filing out of the church, with the rest of them following, watching the grey and burgundy Rolls Royce tear off in a cloud of rusty autumn leaves.

"What now?" asked Stefan. Peter was still at his side, defiantly holding his hand, despite a few looks which were not so much disapproving but double-checking to see if they were actually seeing what they were seeing.

"We go back to the manor, they take pictures of Barry and Christine in every conceivable position, we have an overblown, overpriced catered meal, and then in the evening there's a ceilidh."

"Kay-lee?"

"Party. Piss-up. Dancing, drinking — you know."

"That sounds like fun."

"That's the idea." Peter sighed. "I think we've earned it."

"You going to keep your kilt on?"

"Yeah."

"I'm there," said Stefan.

~

As anonymously as they could, the manor's staff swept away dishes and glasses, folded up the tables, stacked the chairs, and emptied the dining room while a band set up on a small stage.

They'd made it through all the speeches. Peter's father shyly stammered his way through a recipe card of jokes. Christine's father delivered a smooth oration that sounded like

the announcement of a corporate merger at an annual general meeting. Barry's meaty behemoth of a best friend acted as emcee, threatening repeatedly to tell the crowd any number of unsavoury things about Barry's past. His seeming eagerness to do so kept everyone — most notably Barry — on tenterhooks every time he stood to speak.

Now they were home-free.

The band started with some traditional Highland dances. Stefan joined in the first, "The Dashing White Sergeant", desperately looking at Peter to see what he should do. He caught on, though, and was quite proud of himself. No sooner had they finished, though, but they were on to "Strip the Willow". He got out of step a few times, but again caught on just as the dance ended. The next eluded him completely, and he jumped out to spectate. He was amazed at the agility of the wizened older dancers and that all Barry's family and friends knew these intricate moves. Christine's family, however, sat on one side of the room, apparently disapproving of these northern antics.

On a break, Stefan asked Peter where he'd learned to do these dances. "PE classes when it rained," he answered. "The poor girls had to do a lot more of it."

"But that's great. They taught you this vital piece of your culture."

"Mmm, yeah, we were all very excited about that. What about you? You learn any Indian dances or anything?"

Peter had no idea how close to home the comment struck. "No, I left all the mock-Indian stuff to my mother. I am a ridiculously small fraction Métis, though."

"What's that?"

"Long story."

~

"What are they doing?" asked Stefan, looking out the glass doors at Barry's friends. The groom himself was busy elsewhere being polite to scores of people, many of whom he'd likely never meet again. They'd all brought gifts, though, so he was under an obligation.

"They're setting off fireworks," answered Fiona with a scowl as she bounced her baby son in her arms. "Bunch of jerks. The wain here can't sleep, and the manor staff are beside themselves."

"Why?"

"You want to go out there and tell them to stop?" asked Fiona, nodding to the circle of men outside like a drunken rugby team in kilts.

"I will," said Peter, walking past them, out into the garden. Stefan looked anxiously at Fiona, then followed him out.

"Hey lads," said Peter. They stopped and looked at him like he was a kitten in a wolves' den. "Awright?"

"What yeh want, yeh little poof?" asked the relatively smallest of them, whose tiny face was stretched across a balding blonde square of a head.

"Wondering if yehs could quit yer noise." Stefan noticed that Peter's accent was broader, rougher as he spoke to them.

"Or?"

"Or nothing, ya eedgit. Ah'm just sayin', this is a posh place, and yehs can't go off—"

"Shut it, Peter. Your brother's not here to fight for yeh, so yeh better watch it. Why don't you and your boyfriend there just sod off." He turned to the others. "Sod off. Ha!" They laughed with him.

"I always knew there was something queer about you, ever since we were little boys," he continued. "But you and this one, in a church. You talk about having no respect. You make me sick."

"I was in that church for my brother, arsehole, not for your enjoyment, or because I give a toss what that bastard priest has to say about anything."

"Peter," said Stefan, taking his arm, "c'mon, let's go."

"Yeah, listen to yer bent little friend. Yer boyfriend got a name?"

"Don't. Don't you even talk to him, you son of a bitch." He rushed at Square-head, but two of the others grabbed him.

Square-head leaned close and stuck a decorated cardboard tube in Peter's mouth. "You like that, don't you? Why don't you suck on that, and I'm just gunny light the other end."

"No!" yelled Stefan. He threw himself at Square-head and hit him across the face. The blow didn't have nearly the effect he'd hoped. Square-head punched him back and the fourth of the men grabbed his arms and held them to his sides.

"You were going to get out of this easy," hissed Square-head, "but now we're gunny put one o' these numbers where we know *you* like it." He turned back to Peter and flicked his lighter.

Stefan dropped to his knees. The man lost his grip on Stefan's hands. As Stefan stood up, he grabbed the man's right hand with his left, supported his grip with the other hand, and twisted his body around, as if the man were turning him in a pirouette. The man yelled sharply, and swung his other hand in a fist at Stefan's head. Stefan dropped backward and yanked the man's hand in an unnatural direction. "Aaaaa!" he yelled. Stefan let go of the hand, and the man clutched it to his chest.

Peter spat out the firecracker. "Two words for you," he said slowly and quietly to Square-head, "tool... shed."

A look of horror flashed across Square-head's face. "Shut up. Just shut up," he said. "Let him go. He's learnt his lesson."

The men let go of Peter. "I thought yeh wouldn't want me telling yer mates about that. So why don't yehs all just pack it in an' let me nephew get some kip? Go get drunk or something. I know yer good at that. Nighty-night, Jimmy," he said, leaning forward and putting his hands around Square-head as if to kiss him. Square-head recoiled. "Ha! Buncha stupid oiks. C'mon Ste."

Fiona rushed up to them with several other men in tow. "You alright? It looked like you were in trouble, so I got some help."

"We're fine," said Peter, coolly. "Thanks anyway, Fi."

He and Stefan continued walking to the bar next to the dance-floor. "I'm the groom's brother," he announced to the bartender, crossing behind the bar. "I'm just gonna take these, okay?" He lifted up a cardboard case of beer. Before the bartender could answer, Peter said, "Thanks."

They stopped at the front desk. "This is a stunning establishment," Peter said to the clerk, pocketing all their match-boxes, "I want to tell everyone I know about it."

"What are we doing?" asked Stefan, following him up to their room, where Peter stowed the case of beer.

"We're going to have our own private party. But we've got something to do first." They walked out to the car-park beside the manor. "Let's see. Which one do you think they came in?" Among the serviceable cars from Barry's side of the party and the luxury vehicles of Christine's side stood one small white cheap sportscar with tinted black windows, shiny wheel-rims, and an enormous white manatee tail.

Peter flipped the handkerchief from his breast-pocket like a magician. "Could you hold this, please?" he asked, handing it to Stefan. He emptied the boxes of matches one by one into his hand, then expertly hunkered down in his kilt, not showing anything inappropriate, though Stefan had seen it all already, and stuffed the matches up the car's tail-pipe by the handful. "Observe," he said, looking up at Stefan, as he produced from his pockets a small box of fireworks and the larger tube that had been in his mouth.

"When did you—?"

"I got the little ones when I hugged Jimmy there, and they gave me the other one before."

"You're devious."

Peter smiled. He opened the box and poked the fireworks into the tailpipe after the matches. Then he popped in the large tube. "My handkerchief, please." Stefan presented it to him. Peter wrapped it around the tail-pipe, then took apart the carnation boutonniere that had been pinned to his jacket. He unwound the green tape from the flowers and cinched it tightly around the handkerchief over the tail-pipe. "All done. Let's go."

"Er, okay," said Stefan, looking at the car as they headed back to the manor.

"So where did you learn that," asked Peter, "what you did back there?"

"It was my mother's idea. She knew I was different, and didn't want anyone picking on me for it, so we went through this period when she had me taking all kinds of self-defence classes."

"That was cool."

"I didn't know if it would work. I've never got to use it before. But you know, they had you, and—"

"You're my hero," said Peter, and kissed him.

"Hardly. What about you? What did — Jimmy, was it? — what did he not want you to say? You guys didn't, you know—?"

"God, Ste, give me some credit."

"Sorry."

"Well, we kinda did. Not really. There was him and his sister and me. We were all in this tool-shed one time with our jeans and pants down. His parents had given him this book about how babies were made, and he showed it to us. He was curious, and stuck his little willy in his sister."

"No way!"

"Yeah. So he's a bit uncomfortable about that."

"I can imagine," said Stefan with a feigned shudder.

Back in the room, Peter picked up the beer. "Get the covers," he said, indicating with his head. Stefan, unsure, pulled the blankets and duvet from the bed. He followed Peter back outside. They walked from the manor grounds, crossed the adjoining golf course, and continued out to the landscape beyond.

"Here," said Peter. Stefan dropped the blankets and spread them out. They took off their jackets and shoes and lay down.

Stefan walked his hand up Peter's thigh to explore under his kilt, something he'd been wanting to do all day. But they were both too shaken from the earlier confrontation to feel aroused. Instead, Stefan pulled open the box of beer and popped one open for each of them. They sat looking at the sky, content to be silent in each other's company. Stefan looked around at the landscape, which featured little more than lumps and oddly scattered rocks — seemingly dropped from the sky — stretching off for miles to the mountains beyond. The ground was covered with heather, still faintly purple in the moonlight, despite the late season. Something about it all seemed strangely familiar.

Neither of them had any sense of time, except for the slow arc of the moon. Peter cleared their empty cans and their current half-full ones from the blankets and pulled them over him and Stefan. They dozed until a huge bang woke them up. A flaming red shape like a fiery palm tree filled the sky, with tiny green fronds around it.

"Oh my God!" said Stefan.

Peter laughed with perverse pleasure. "Cheers," he said, lifting a can of beer.

Stefan grabbed one and clunked it against Peter's. As he sipped it, he watched the lights fading in the sky. Looking at the moon-like landscape around them, it dawned on him slowly. "This is a dream."

"Yeah," said Peter, smiling, "it is." He kissed him.

No, thought Stefan, *I dreamt this. A year ago*. But he didn't correct Peter, because he was right, too.

Chapter Eighteen

Misplaced

Peter pulled on his coat, then climbed back onto the bed where Stefan was reading a newspaper.

"Seems there was a riot in Rome last week following the performance of a play," said Stefan.

"So?"

"It was my dad's play," he added.

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. It's right here: 'Show Sparks Demonstration'," said Stefan, holding up the paper.

"I don't have time, Ste, I've got to get to the restaurant. The quality are hungry, and it's up to me to make sure they're properly fed." He stopped as he saw the excitement in Stefan's face. "It's great, though. That must really be some show. Tell me more about it later. I just — I really have to go." He wrapped a scarf around his neck. "Can you believe we slept outside just a week ago? And today it's threatening to snow."

"Any word from the newlyweds?"

"Yeah, they called last night after you went to bed. Barry says hi — expressive as always. But Christine wanted me to tell you how happy she was that you were at the wedding."

"Aww, that's nice."

"Well, it was good of you to be there." He kissed Stefan on the cheek. "So what are you going to do with yourself today?"

"Well, this article has got me thinking. I'm going to try to find my father... Somewhere."

"Er, okay," said Peter. "Good luck. I'll see you when I get home."

~

Stefan sat in the grey cavern that was Saint Giles Cathedral. The space was nearly empty, except for a few tourists who occasionally snapped pictures. Though he didn't have a religious background, an instinct told Stefan that photographing a holy space was taboo, or at least in poor taste.

He heard singing from several directions, hymns and chanting, intermixed with some mumbling. These sounds weren't coming from the tourists, or the tidy, wizened woman who sat at an information table. The songs and utterances came from the statues and carvings around the cathedral. No one else reacted to them, so Stefan figured he was the only one who heard them. His mother always told him how sensitive he was, and went to great lengths to expound on the richness of their aboriginal culture's spiritual traditions. It had occurred to him on several occasions that he might just be insane and Delonia overcompensating. But events lately had fallen together in a way that reassured him that not only was he of sound mind, perhaps things were also working out as they were supposed to. His experiences had been tumultuous, but the payoffs — seeing his father, working with the theatre company, and now finding Peter — made it all worthwhile.

His father was nowhere to be found here in the church. Somehow he knew this. He stood up from the small wooden chair in the side chapel where'd he'd been sitting. He put a hand on the armoured glove of the marble man who lay there with a sword across his chest, and mentally thanked him for letting him stop for a while in his space. Stefan didn't know why, but statues of the dead, laid out and resting, didn't speak or stir in any way. The statuary in Edinburgh seemed to be growing more and more restless, so Stefan appreciated the relative quiet of this space.

Stefan walked across the bridges into the New Town. A small group of soldiers from the Great War stood on a pillar halfway across, mounted to one side of the pavement. They shouted battlefield instructions to each other and looked around, confused.

"The enemy is out there," said one.

"Where?" asked another. He reloaded his rifle, knelt down, pulled his wide-brimmed bowl of a helmet down and adjusted to keep from sinking into the mud.

"I don't know," said the first.

"Where are we?" asked the third.

"I don't know," said the first.

Stefan pretended that he, like the others crossing the bridge, didn't see them. He had an idea for figuring out what was happening with the statues. It was strange, but he was growing accustomed to strange. He walked through a small ravine formed on one side by a concrete mass containing a shopping mall and on the other side by a glass movie theatre that clung to the base of Calton Hill like a giant aquarium full of neon lights, escalators, and people.

He crossed a busy street and walked to a statue he'd noticed a while ago. He looked up at the bronze man who stood on a concrete base. The man's face was narrow and pensive. He wore a hunting cap with two peaks, a long cloak-like overcoat, and held a pipe. "Mister Holmes?" asked Stefan.

"Hello, yes?" Statue-Holmes looked down. "You can see me?" he asked curtly and incredulously.

"Yes, I can. I was wondering if you could help me."

"I'm not so sure that I can. I don't feel quite myself." He paused as if searching for something half-remembered. "My faculties are not what they once were. I — Where am I?"

"You're in Edinburgh, Mister Holmes."

He turned about and looked at the modern buildings around him. The dense traffic didn't register in his carved-out eyes. The dark metal features of his face squinted. "I can't recall—" he began, but interrupted himself, distressed by an emerging awareness. "I am not Sherlock Holmes."

"No, sir," said Stefan, "you're a statue of him."

"What do you know of this Sherlock Holmes?" the statue demanded.

"He was a character. In books. A series of books by a man named Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. It says on this plaque that he was born near here. Doyle, that is."

"Have you read these books?"

"Uh, no," Stefan admitted quietly. "But I did see a play once based on one of them!"

"Was it good?"

"Uh, not really." Stefan buried his hands in the pockets of the heavy jacket he'd borrowed from Peter.

"I'm not sure how helpful I can be to you," said the statue. "I'm afraid I've very little with which to work." He angled one foot on the pedestal and tapped his pipe against his lip as he thought, just as Stefan figured he might. The statue seemed to be balancing ideas against his moment-to-moment experiences of himself. Finally, he pronounced: "I am not even so much as a statue of this Sherlock Holmes. I am a statue of an artist's *idea* of Sherlock Holmes — several times removed from even a fictional source of origin, I'm afraid. The fact that you know next to nothing about me is further limiting."

Stefan struggled to keep up with the statue's line of thinking. The statue was clearly cleverer than he was. Or, rather, Stefan corrected himself, he was based on the idea of someone cleverer. "That's it, what you said. You just answered my question. You're an idea. Hume — another statue across town — he said something similar to me. He asked who I was, and when I told him my name, he said that was just an idea. I get it now: he didn't know who he was because *I* didn't have any idea who he was."

"Do people still read these books by Doyle?" asked the panic-stricken statue.

"Oh yeah, they're still very popular."

"Thank goodness. I'm safe."

"Yes," said Stefan. An alarmed look took over his face. "You mean, if enough people forget... I've gotta go. Thank you!" Before the statue could respond, Stefan ran away. His coat flapped open in the wind as he ran back across the bridges, back to the Royal Mile to the spot where he'd spoken to the statue of Hume.

The statue was gone.

~

Peter walked into the flat, still wearing his chequered kitchen-worker's trousers and white smock. He hung his thin jacket on the wall over the heavy one he'd given Stefan. "What's going on?" he asked. Fiona sat bouncing her son on her leg. She looked relieved to see him. Stefan sat on a footstool in front of her, leaning with his elbows on his knees. Roddy stared at the ceiling, bewildered.

"Ste's been explaining a theory to me about our city," said Fiona, flaring her eyes and shaking her head.

"Peter, the statues are disappearing," said Ste, jumping up.

"Ste, the *city* is disappearing," he answered.

"Och, not you, too," said Fiona.

"This is what I've been telling you," said Peter. "These development sites that Rab's been taking us to, the restoration contracts that are going out — they're destroying the city."

"Thank you," said Stefan, dropping back down to his seat, his hands in the air.

"There's a demonstration tomorrow, Ste, a protest against a new development that's taking over a whole section of the Old Town. I'm going with Rab and the boys. I didn't want to speak for you, but—"

"No, I'm there," said Stefan.

~

Someone at the front of the crowd shouted into a megaphone. From where he stood, Stefan couldn't make out the speaker's words.

"What's she saying?" asked Iain.

"No idea," said Peter.

"This is rubbish," said Calum. "Let's go."

"Can we stay till the end?" asked Rab.

"What are we protesting, Rab? It's just two hundred hippies standing around on a Baltic day, freezing our bollocks off, yelling at — oh, no one in particular! When I agreed to come here, I thought there would at least be someone to protest *at*."

"There was supposed to be," said Rab. "They were supposed to do the ground-breaking today, the official opening of this new project."

"What's it going to be?" asked Iain.

"A shopping mall built into this old site," said Rab.

"Great," said Peter. "Just what we needed: more outlets for sweatshop clothes and slave coffee."

"I'm going," said Calum.

"Yeah, okay," sighed Rab, "let's go."

They walked a few short blocks and descended the stairs to Dig Nation. Fiona was behind the bar, and nodded to them as they came in, unsurprised to see them. They proceeded to their usual booth deep in the back. Peter went to the bar to get them a round of drinks.

Fiona whispered: *Pay for them*. She nodded toward the back, where he saw the owner of the bar moving about the kitchen.

"Hello, Peter," said the owner as he came from the back. In his tidy Argyll jumper and crisp grey slacks, he looked strangely out of place in his own bar; but then, he was not its target audience. "How are you doing today?"

“Alright, thanks. Just came from a protest. It was rubbish.”

“Oh yes. I went to a few protests in my day. What was this one about?”

“A development project that’s starting up in this area.”

“Oh,” said the man, looking troubled. He was in the process of picking up a glass, but put it back down. “Yes, about that. I’ve been meaning to talk to you both.”

“Why?” asked Fiona.

“I’ve been offered a rather tidy sum for this place, and I’ve been thinking—”

“You’re *not*!” said Peter.

“You two know as well as I do that this place doesn’t make a profit. The people who come here don’t spend much, and they stay for a long time. It’s dark and murky in here, and young people today want lights and atmosphere.”

“This place has loads of atmosphere!” insisted Peter.

“Yes, but not the kind that draws people in. Besides, they implied quite unmistakably that if I didn’t sell, I would be crowded out. So I can either accept their generous offer now, or make nothing later on.”

“So we’re out of work,” said Fiona.

“Well, not tomorrow.”

“You’ve already accepted the offer then?” asked Peter.

“I have. I’m sorry.” He looked at the floor and walked back into the kitchen.

Fiona looked at him and gave a heavy sigh.

“We’ll talk about it at home,” said Peter. He held out a ten-pound note.

“What’s that for?”

“The drinks.”

“Forget that,” she said. “They’re on the house.”

Stefan came to help carry the drinks back to the table. “What happened here?” he asked, seeing their faces.

“We’ll tell you later,” said Fiona.

Peter and Stefan divided the different pints among them. “What are we talking about?” asked Peter.

Iain moaned and said, “Rab’s being a nutter.”

“I’m serious,” insisted Rab. “We’ve got to do something about this. What are we going to do, sit around and wait for some historic trust group to stop this? By then it’ll be too late. And these people have enough money to buy their way through any kind of opposition.”

“So what are you thinking about?” asked Peter.

Rab crossed his arms on the table and leaned forward. “Sabotage.”

Chapter Nineteen

Paper Chase

Stefan leaned over Peter's sleeping body, put an ear next to his open mouth, and listened. His deep, glottal breaths sounded like ocean waves. Stefan kissed Peter's mouth. The ocean receded with a quick inhalation and Peter's eyes fluttered open.

Stefan smiled, then shuffled himself down to kiss Peter's neck, making him shudder. Then he moved his lips lightly down Peter's torso, following the thin line of hair to his belly button.

"Huh?"

Peter sat up slightly, leaning on his elbows. "What?"

Stefan tugged at Peter's navel.

"What are you doing?" asked Peter. His eyes widened as he watched Stefan uncoiling paper from him like one of the rolls of caps he used to play with as a boy. "What the hell—?"

"It's okay," Stefan assured him, smiling. "I guess my dad wanted to put this somewhere I'd find it."

"That tickles!"

"Got it. Finished," said Stefan.

"You realise that this is weird for me, don't you?"

"Dad's got a sense of humour," said Stefan, uncurling the paper, which turned out to be several strips.

"What is it?" asked Peter.

"I'm not sure. Looks like someone tore across a bunch of papers, some kind of document. But I don't know what it's from." He held up a strip, looking closely at it. "This one's got my father's name and signature on it."

Peter prodded his belly with his fingers. "Where did it come from?"

"I don't know," answered Stefan. "Where does belly-button lint come from? I wear a white T-shirt, I get blue lint. This makes as much sense as anything else." He sat cross-legged and laughed. "When I was little, my mother used to tell me that's where they filled me with soul and tied me up so it wouldn't leak out."

"She sounds like an interesting woman."

"Yeah," conceded Stefan, "I suppose she is."

"Does she even know where you are?"

"No." He pictured Helen croaking a confession under duress. "I suppose somebody's probably told her."

"You're a bit of a jerk, aren't you?"

Stefan gave him a look of incredulity. "This, from you?"

"What?"

"Okay, let me illustrate my point: Peter, I love you."

"I love you too, Ste."

Stefan blinked. "Oh."

"You expected me to hit you or something?"

"Yeah."

Peter took a pillow from behind his back and clobbered him.

~

"How's that?" asked the barber.

Stefan sat up in the chair. He hadn't been paying attention. "Perfect," he said.

He paid the barber and walked to the local co-operative grocery store. The older women and the teenaged boys working the tills were surly, but Stefan liked the idea of a co-op, even if it didn't look any different than a regular store. He noticed that the music was generic, a succession of sound-alike singers covering popular songs. *Discount muzak*, he

thought, *we pass the savings onto you*. He filled a basket with vegetables, taking advantage of several bags of “Reduced for quick sale” produce, paid for it all with some of his remaining money, then headed back to the flat. He’d offered to cook supper for Peter, Fiona, and himself, and was even tempted to lure out the other flatmate.

He stopped to look at a tiny old church that caught his eye. Its spires were lower than the clay chimney-pots of the surrounding tenement buildings, and its eaves were covered in elaborate gables like wooden spider webs that had caught flowers. The body of the structure was surrounded with scaffolding. *Like Peter said, a city on crutches*. He wondered what was left of the inside of the building, and wished he could see it. *Cute*, was his final verdict: not so much a house of God; more like a cottage of God.

A sign stood in front: “Modernisation by Morton”.

He picked up the groceries and continued his walk home.

~

Stefan and Peter walked over wet black cobbles, through a foggy night pierced only by the dull yellow of occasional sodium lamps.

Supper went well, though the flatmate didn’t answer Stefan’s knocks, and Peter was preoccupied with the plan Rab had cooked up for the evening.

“I don’t see why he needs us,” said Stefan.

“I think he wants *someone* to know he did this, since he can’t exactly go telling people.” He turned to Stefan. “Besides, I *want* to be there. I don’t agree with what they’re doing, either.”

They reached the construction site. Peter pointed up at the gauzy floodlit sign that clung to the front of the building. It read “Morton: The face of tomorrow”.

“See, that offends me,” said Peter.

“It’s just an ad,” said Stefan. “They paid to put it there. It’s their building; they can do what they like.”

“Well, that’s arguable,” countered Peter. “I’ll give you the fact that they’ve bought the building. But that message doesn’t just hang on the building. When you look at it, it goes into your head. They didn’t pay you for that space. It’s an invasion, a violation of your mind. Besides that, they should have worked with the amazing building that was there and done something decent. Do you think the developer was thinking about how their plans fit in with the surroundings, or whether the work they do is going to last more than ten years? No, they don’t care about any of that. They just want a big, fat contract.”

“Okay. So this is why Rab wants to change the sign?”

“Yeah.”

“And we’re supposed to help him.”

“Yeah. Hey,” said Peter, pointing at Iain, who walked toward them. “Alright, Iain?”

“Heya,” he answered, looking ruffled. “Do you guys know what Rab is up to?”

“More or less,” said Peter. “What’s wrong?”

“All sorts of things, as a matter of fact. For starters, this is illegal in I don’t know how many ways.”

“And you don’t like heights.”

“And I don’t like heights. But that’s not the point.”

Stefan interjected. “We’re supposed to go up there with him?”

“That was the idea. He’s got the equipment, but he can’t operate it and paint at the same time.”

Iain grabbed Peter’s shoulder. “Can’t you talk him out of it, please?”

“No. I’m not going to do that.” Peter looked around. “Where’s Calum?”

“He didn’t show up. We were at a pub earlier, and he got to chatting up this bird. You know how he is when he’s on the pull.”

"He just left you? Nice friend," said Peter. He turned to Stefan. "See, didn't I warn you about Calum?"

"Yes. Yes, you did. I'm just finding your sense of right and wrong rather interesting at the moment."

"Come on, Rab'll be waiting for us. Coming, Iain?"

"I — I can't, Peter. You know I'd do anything for you guys, but I don't see what—"

"It's okay, Iain. You shouldn't do it if you don't feel right about it. But I do. I'll tell Rab something or another. Don't worry about it."

"Thanks, Peter. Goodnight. I'll see you guys. Be careful."

"Will do."

Iain walked away. He was soon blurred out of focus by the fog, then totally erased.

"Same goes for you, Ste. Don't feel like you have to do this just because I am."

"No, I—" Stefan started. But he couldn't finish the thought. It was a lie. He shook his head. "I'm with you."

Peter put his arm around Stefan and they walked down a side road that led to the back of the building. Two panels of high metal mesh like the sides of shopping trolleys had been pried apart. Peter and Stefan slipped through the opening. The wall facing them had been battered open, a crumbling cave-mouth. Stefan gawked at the ruin: the building's innards had been scooped out entirely. Work-lights illuminated the rubble, the windows, the pillars, and the ruin of it. An enormous crane rose to an impossible height in the sky. Beside it rumbled a diesel generator the size of a camper-van.

Peter saw the expression on Stefan's face. "This is what they do. First they gut out the buildings. They throw away all that history and style and pour in something completely bland and whitewashed. After that, they claim that it's unsteady or something, and knock it all down to put up a block of concrete and glass and steel."

"I come from the place where they grow those buildings," said Stefan. "But they belong there, because most of the time they're just replacing an earlier version of the same thing. But I see what you mean about this." He stepped over the desolation on the ground, all of it covered in beige dust. He stared up through the open roof at the downy feather of a moon. "Whatever goes in here, I just feel like it's going to be — *less*."

"Okay," said Peter, sitting down on the raised outline of a former wall, "imagine there's this ship sailing, and as they go, the sailors throw out old parts of the ship and replace them with new plastic ones that won't wear out. What's even better, they're standardised, exactly the same parts that every other plastic ship in every other port uses."

"Okay," said Stefan.

"How much of it has to be replaced before it's no longer the original ship?"

Stefan looked distressed. "And if it's the same as every other plastic ship—"

"Exactly. Soon you wouldn't even be able to tell them apart. They're all essentially the same ship. And if all the plastic ports all looked the same—"

"There's no point sailing anywhere."

Rab came into view, clambering over some rubble toward them. "Alright?"

"Heya," answered Peter, standing.

"You boys ready?"

"Yup," said Peter, offering a hand to pull Stefan up from his seat. They followed Rab to the front of the building, where the window-washer's scaffold he'd acquired lay on the ground, surrounded by cans of paint and some sign-maker's equipment.

"They've already done half the work for us. All we have to do," said Rab, "is get these ropes through those winches up there." They looked up to the tiny points above.

"Yeah, piece of cake," quipped Stefan.

"You don't have to scale up the wall, Ste. There's all kinds of metalwork on the back of the wall holding it up." Rab tied a rope around Stefan's waist. "You and Peter will climb up that, feed the ropes through those winches, throw the ends down to me, and I'll meet you up there with the platform."

“Why are we doing this? Couldn’t we just mount another protest? A better one?”

“You saw what that did,” said Peter. “Nothing. These people have to get the message that everything isn’t for sale. There are limits to what we’ll take.” He took Stefan’s hand and led him around to the rear face of the wall, which was reinforced with a honeycomb of metal pipes, sticking out at odd angles to form triangular shapes all the way up. Having left Rab behind at the front of the building, Peter put his hands on Stefan’s shoulders. “If you don’t want to go up there, that’s okay. I can do it in two trips.”

“This is a totally stupid idea. Isn’t there some other—?”

“You’re not talking me out of this Ste.” He put his hand on Stefan’s chest. “Don’t you feel that? Like you’re really alive. Isn’t that why we’re here?”

“No, Peter. I totally believe it’s why *you’re* here. I’m here for—” He saw an elegant ballroom spread out, overlaying the wasteland inside the building’s walls. Instead of dust and crumbled brick, there was a marble floor with a mesmerising pattern laid into it. He looked up from the floor at Peter, who stood floodlit by a work-light, back in the middle of desolation. “I’m here for something else,” said Stefan, “even if I can’t say exactly what that is.” He craned his neck to look up the wall. “But you are part of why I’m here, and I’m damned if I’m going to let you risk your neck going up there twice. So let’s get this done.”

“We’ll start here,” said Peter, moving to the wall, getting a handhold on a pipe, “and we’ll stick together till we get close to the top, then we’ll split off to either side.” Stefan nodded and placed both his hands on a pipe over his head, raised a foot onto a pipe, then wedged his other foot against an opposite pipe. The metal lattice was tight, and he found it easy to climb up it. In moments he’d moved what he figured was about fifteen feet off the ground.

Looking down to check was a bad idea, he realised, and he decided not to do it again. The pipes were cold, but his body was growing warm. His jacket, which barely kept out the damp cold earlier, now seemed too heavy. He turned to Peter and leaned back, swinging out an arm with a thumbs up. Peter smiled and returned the sign.

They were soon close to the top of the wall. Stefan’s arms were sore, as much from nervous tension as exertion. Peter pointed to indicate that Stefan should head to his right. Stefan nodded and climbed away in that direction. The movement was awkward, not like the easy passage up the tunnel of shapes he’d been following before. He had to place both knees on one bar and reach across to move further over.

Feathers and fluttering wings burst from the wall, brushing Stefan’s face. The startled pigeon made him miss the pole and he tumbled forward. With a loud tear, his jacket caught on the screws holding together a trio of pipes, and yanked him to a halt before he fell. He watched as his house-keys and a packet of gum dropped into the fog below. The bird landed on the bar in front of him. Stefan lunged forward for a handhold, and the pigeon beat its wings noisily, flying upward then sailing easily away. Stefan felt a pang of envy for something so free of gravity.

He established a firm grip with one hand and a secure hold for both his feet, and wrenched the jacket free, tearing away part of the front and exposing its mottled fluff innards. *Sorry, Peter*, he thought, *I’ll buy you a new one when this is all over*. Then it occurred to him that he still didn’t have a job. *What the hell am I doing?* he wondered.

Confirming that he still had his rope, he started back upward. He moved slowly and carefully, making his way to the top of the building. A sizable chunk of the original masonry was intact here, necessitating an awkward climb over the lip of the old roof. Once on top, he looked across to see Peter, who stood up, raised his arms over his head, and let out a whoop. Stefan waved from where he hunkered, and crawled to the large mechanical winch he’d been assigned.

With the ropes in place, Rab quickly got the platform working. Stefan cringed every time Rab pressed one of the large buttons in the heavy yellow box that controlled the winches: the sound of the motors seemed excessively loud in the otherwise empty night. But in just over an hour of painting and adjusting the platform, Rab was finished.

Back on the ground, Rab admired his handiwork. Stefan tried to enjoy the thrill of being “bad”, but was relieved it was all over. Peter, he noticed, vibrated with the excitement of it. Badness was a way of being for him, but this was a new high.

They helped Rab load the platform and the paint into the van he’d borrowed for the occasion, then followed the trail of extension cables back to the enormous generator.

“Oh, my keys,” said Stefan, “I dropped them while we were climbing.” He indicated his exposed fluffy side.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Peter. “I’ve got mine. I think it’s time we got home.” Stefan could tell by the sound in his voice that the evening’s excitement made him feel even more amorous than usual.

“Right then,” said Rab, eying the generator. He put his hands on it, searching for an opening. Without looking back at them, he said, “You guys head on home. Thanks for all your help. I’m just going to stay here for a bit. I’ve got one more thing to do.”

Stefan and Peter said goodbye to him and walked back into the fog.

~

Morton was not much of a physical presence, just a small, pale man in a black suit with expensive-looking glasses and a combed-back head of dark hair over a high, blank forehead. But he had an air of importance that made him take up a lot of space. Perhaps it was the fawning of the aides, managers, and consultants who surrounded him that created this atmosphere, but that didn’t seem to account for it. As Stefan eyed him from the crowd, he imagined that the man had possessed this quality all his life, which now made him seem to exceed his size, to have more gravity than the other human beings around him, even to absorb and reflect more of the morning’s sunlight.

One thing was undeniable: he was fuming. His flagship building, which he was to dedicate today, now sported the words “Morton: Defacing tomorrow”. As a flourish, Rab had changed the words “To let” into “Toilet”.

The members of the media who’d been assigned this routine piece of ribbon-cutting and self-congratulation were ecstatic at the development of a real story. The Lord Provost did his best to placate the businessman, but it wasn’t working. Peter whispered into Stefan’s ear, “He looks like he’s about to have a tanty.”

On the contrary, though, the man straightened his tie, took a deep breath, and gave an inhumanly wide smile. He raised his hands, and silence fell. “I guess not everyone appreciates our work. But I thank you, and I thank the Lord Provost, for joining me in our commitment to make this city into a vita—”

An explosion went off behind him, sending jets of black and orange from the windows of the empty building. The crowd dropped to the ground.

Except for Rab. Stefan and Peter looked at him, but he was transfixed by what he’d created. His reverie was broken by the sound of twisting metal. The crane listed. The crowd watched, dumbstruck and helpless, as the enormous ninety-degree angle of metal tipped, slowly at first, then gaining speed, and its point drove like a tack-hammer into the shopping mall across the street.

While the onlookers shrieked and gasped, Rab ran, shoving his way through them. Peter ran after him, catching the attention of the one policeman next to Morton who had his eye on the crowd. Stefan saw this and ran after Peter. The policeman, in his black uniform with a fluorescent yellow vest, spoke into a radio at his shoulder then chased after the three men.

They ran down the pavement along a main street, then Rab bolted across traffic, his lanky legs making huge strides and his skinny arms windmilling about. Cars honked and screeched in his wake, forcing Peter and Stefan in turn to stop and zigzag to get across without being hit.

“Rab!” yelled Peter, but they’d lost him.

“Policeman!” panted Stefan as he reached Peter. He pushed him forward and they started running again. The officer was not far behind.

They headed down a side street, an underbelly where old and new parts of the city met. A second officer stepped into the street ahead, not yet seeing them. Peter gave Stefan a shove, sending him reeling down a tiny brick close that ended in a triangular point. “Here I am!” yelled Peter. Stefan saw the first officer run past the close’s opening.

Stefan sat for some time. Not knowing how or where they would take Peter, he ran back to the shopping mall, which lay under the arm of the crane whose point was buried deep in the modern structure. Its length hadn’t yet broken through the roof.

He didn’t know anything about first aid, but joined with those who helped to get people out of the building. Ambulances arrived, and an emergency medical crew took over. There was nothing more he could do, so Stefan slipped away.

He walked home in a daze, but realised on the way that he didn’t have a key to get into the flat. A minute away from the tenement, he heard sirens and saw police cars converging on their front door. He wondered if his father had anything to do with the pigeon who made him lose his keys.

Unsure where to go, Stefan kept walking. He was hungry, and headed toward the grocery store, where he was sure he’d find something he could afford with the money in his pocket.

He stopped in front of a pair of tenement buildings. There was nothing unusual about them, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was missing. He turned his head, and it occurred to him: *The church.*

The little church with the ornate gables was gone. The neighbours walked past, none of them noticing the change. Stefan was sure he’d seen a church here earlier, but now it was gone. The space between the other buildings where it once stood was stitched up as if it had never been there.

The sun slid away behind the distant hills, and the doorways of the street filled with shadows. Stefan thought of the Catholics. *This is what they’ve seen. First the statues disappearing, now the buildings. And they think I have something to do with it.*

For all I know, he thought, I do.

Chapter Twenty

Rent Asunder

Stefan sat in Princes Street Gardens enjoying the green of the grass, the last colour left in the city as it moved into winter. The sky hung low and threatening, and soon it opened, releasing big, soaking drops. He had to go somewhere, but for three days he'd been afraid to go home in case the police were there.

Stefan ran through the rain toward the art gallery. It would be free to enter, and he could spend some time there. He ran along the pavement, which was wet and beige, and peopled with umbrella-carriers. The Old Town towered above at the top of the hill, its spires blacker and more sinister in the gloom. The damp cold penetrated his jacket as if he wasn't even wearing one. He marvelled at the locals, walking in suit-jackets or light coats.

He smiled as the man posted at the gallery entrance opened the door for him. Stefan felt shabby in his torn coat and with three days' stubble on his face, but the man didn't seem to mind.

As he walked into the main floor of the gallery, Stefan was enthralled with the huge old paintings, and happy that the place was busy, even though it was a weekday afternoon. Free admission to national galleries seemed to him a wonderfully egalitarian policy, an investment by the nation in the civilisation of its people.

The longer he stayed, though, the more he realised that the paintings were not to his taste. Portraits of nobles, and countless chubby and very Caucasian baby Jesuses made him feel weary. He decided to investigate the floor above, where the modern art was.

In the hallway leading upstairs was a semicircular staircase split into two. The wall opposite the stairs was filled with white plaster heads on Ionic platforms — the heads of emperors, some bearded, some young. As Stefan climbed the stairs, the heads chattered nonsensically. Before he was halfway up, he had to cover his ears to shut out the din. The heads' mouths were wide now, shouting at him, at each other, at the empty space above. He changed direction and ran back down.

He was hungry. In his pocket, he had two pound coins and sixty pence worth of silver coins. A restaurant was out of the question.

He looked at a small bronze statue of a naked boy with a javelin. The tiny athlete struck poses for him. Its maker had a clear, uncomplicated intention for the figure, which was unclouded by the years. The boy was an embodiment of young, athletic beauty. While it fell safely into the empirical realm of pure art, Stefan still felt guilty looking at it, and moved away. Something pricked his hand, and he looked down to see that the boy had thrown his javelin. He looked petulantly at Stefan, upset that he wasn't being admired. Stefan looked around, picked up the tiny spear, dropped it next to the figure, and moved quickly away.

For all his appreciation of the culture here, he was bored. He also needed to eat. He would have liked nothing more than to go home and have his tea with Fiona and Peter, except Peter wasn't there. He was being held somewhere. Stefan had no idea where.

Were the police looking for him? He didn't know, so he didn't dare go back to the house. His heart raced.

One thing at a time, he thought. Food.

He left the gallery, stepping back into the rain, and climbed a now-familiar staircase, which delivered him reliably to the place on the Royal Mile he expected it to. The city, or at least the centre of it, was now his. It had shown itself to him, and they seemed to have struck a deal.

He walked to a nearby chippy and bought chips with salt and brown sauce. Putting the hot paper packet inside his coat, he ran to Saint Giles' Cathedral and slunk inside, moving past the leering statue of John Knox to his favourite chapel. He apologised to the statue laid there with sword in hand, opened up his chips, and put one of the steaming yellow chunks into his mouth. The salt added a sharp crunch to its softness, and the sauce was so tangy it

made his mouth hurt as his salivary glands fired at the back of his jaw. Regular meals were easy to take for granted; he appreciated this meal more than any in a long time.

The statues of the dead made for easy company, Stefan felt, because their makers created them to be peaceful, unmoving, and noble. The choral singing in here was pleasant, too. He licked his fingers and thought of the emperors back at the gallery, pitying them for being sentenced to an eternity as bodiless heads propped up on platforms. Who they were was a muddle of names and dates. He figured they must be insane, existing as they did without definition. The artists' intent was their soul, but that diffused without the awareness of new generations to perpetuate it. With that forgotten by all but a few, they were just a bunch of fancy regal heads. No wonder they didn't get along, forced to stare at each other all day, vaguely aware that their namesakes replaced each other at some point in history.

A service of some kind gathered in the church. Stefan crumpled the empty chip-wrapper, stuffed it in his remaining jacket pocket, and headed for the exit.

~

Stefan avoided making eye contact with anyone in the room, concentrating instead on the black and white photographs on the walls, then on the glass of red wine in his hand.

He'd discovered the launch of a photography exhibit in a stark white modern cube of a gallery nestled in an old stone building, and slipped into the crowd. Happily, he didn't have to worry about his appearance, as many of the guests were dressed in street-person chic. The others' clothing ranged from expensive, trendy suits to bizarre evening gowns with dramatic slashes and bunches of fabric.

He rested his nose on the edge of his wine glass and looked at a picture of a young girl smiling to show off her missing front teeth. Her father, standing beside her in a tough-looking neighbourhood, held her hand and wore the same smile. Stefan loved the photos, though he wasn't sure how much of that was the wine: his glass had been generously refilled twice, and his stomach was empty again.

Finished his drink and feeling like an impostor in the crowd, he plunked his glass down on a table and walked out into the night. The streets were still slick, with black puddles like oil reflecting the yellow lamps. The rain had stopped.

His lover was missing. Or his boyfriend. His partner. They'd never decided on a word, he realised. All those years he'd pined for someone — someone specific, who'd arrived in Peter Hailes. Now he'd gone and lost him.

Slumping down in a back-alley doorway, Stefan drifted off to sleep. He awoke some time later, shivering, cold, and damp down to his bones. Something like gritty footsteps woke him. He peered into the darkness, not noticing the two luminous white circles in front of him until they blinked.

He scrambled to his feet, clinging to the door behind him. The figure, however, stood still, regarding him intently.

"I didn't do it," said Stefan. "Peter and I didn't blow up the building. It was his friend, but I know he didn't mean t—"

The creature pushed a hand into Stefan's chest and pinned him back against the door. Stefan struggled, but the scratchman was too strong here in the darkness. He couldn't pull himself free. *This is it*, he thought. He wondered what the thing would do, and how it would be to die. *How strange*, he thought, *dying at the hand of something that's probably been through the experience.*

The scratchman held up a fist. Stefan flinched, but held the thing's gaze. It looked at him quizzically, and in the faint light Stefan saw the figures on its face shifting, working themselves out. He felt that the thing was trying to figure him out, too, to see where he fit into what had been happening.

It took a step backward and held out his fist, opening it to reveal Stefan's house-keys. Stefan carefully took the keys.

"Thank you," said Stefan.

The creature nodded.

"You can feel it, can't you?" he dared to ask it. "You know I'm not the cause of all this."

The scratchman squinted. *Not entirely sure*, the expression said.

Before it changed its mind, Stefan said another quick thank-you for the keys, and bolted away down the alley. He took the stairs at its end three at a time and ran to the next well-lit junction. An idea sprang into his mind, and he continued running to Dig Nation. When he arrived at the club, though, it was dark. He descended the steps and discovered the door was locked. Posted in the door's window was a city planning permit, announcing the intended redevelopment of the premises.

"Dammit," said Stefan, hitting the door.

For several hours, he walked about. The pubs closed, spilling their patrons onto the pavement. One less place he could go, he thought, but then, if he'd gone in and bought a pint he'd have no money left for food. The nightclubs all had long lines in front of them, and he figured they'd charge a cover, too.

Soon the nightclubs emptied, too. Women in tiny skirts and impossibly high and pointy shoes staggered in groups together or yelled at their men. The men, with nothing but shirtsleeves against the cold, shout-sang at the walls, ate food from polystyrene containers, then threw up the things they'd just eaten.

He headed in the opposite direction and walked until he found himself at the base of the stairs that led up to Calton Hill. He climbed, not sure why.

There were men up here. Men with homes. He could go home with someone and have a shower, maybe even a meal. He wouldn't necessarily have to do anything. He shook the idea from his head. He couldn't do that. He belonged to Peter.

Was Peter "The One"? he wondered. Was there such a thing? He'd had such bad luck in the past; maybe Peter was just the first decent person to show up. Did that make him the one to stay with?

Stefan sat on the base of the enormous concrete urn and looked out over the city. In the distance, out over the Firth, the sky grew pink along the horizon. The few remaining clouds looked as though they were sunburnt by the coming dawn. *Is that good or bad?* he wondered.

Red sky at morning, sailors take warning, he remembered his father saying. He looked around, but it wasn't actually his father, just a memory.

Where was his father? he wondered. He'd asked him all those months ago for salvation. This was anything but. He thought of Peter. Romance hadn't proved to be his salvation. He hadn't expected it to be, though perhaps he'd hoped.

He was luckier than most, he figured, hearing Peter's voice for all those years. If that didn't let him know they should be together, he didn't know what would. His heart, he wondered, that vague sensation inside him, unexplainable yet unmistakably real and usually right about things — what did it tell him?

Off to his right, along the gravel path, men moved in the remaining darkness under the trees. Stefan didn't want them, no matter who they were. The trick to love, he supposed, was choosing Peter as "The One" over and over again.

Easy, he thought.

He took the house-keys from his pocket. He wondered what the scratchman meant by giving them back to him. Had it wanted him out of the picture, it would have done away with him in the alley, not left him to be caught by the police. Perhaps it was telling him it was safe to go back home.

He would risk it, he decided. He stood, stretching his limbs against the cold that seeped into them from the monument, and walked toward home. As he entered their street, he walked slowly, checking the cars to see if anyone was sitting in them, watching. They were

empty. He unlocked the front door and walked up the staircase to the flat. He let himself in, closed the door, and let his body drink in the heat.

The kitchen was full of boxes, and he stumbled noisily a few times as he fixed himself a cup of tea.

"Hello," said a voice. Stefan jumped. He turned to see Fiona, bleary-eyed and rubbing her face, her hair a tangle of fuzz.

"It's so good to see you," he said, and crossed the kitchen to hug her.

"Oi, you're a bit minky, aren't you?" she said.

"Oh, sorry about that. I've kinda been outside for a few days. I haven't been able to wash myself properly, just in bathrooms and stuff."

"What did you disappear for?"

"I thought the police would be looking for me. I didn't think I should come back here in case they showed up."

She tightened her dressing-gown and sat down on an old wooden chair. Stefan sat on another of the mismatched chairs. "Oh, the police showed up alright. They came back so many times the lodger got nervous and moved out."

"The mystery girl, she left?"

"Yep."

"That's great!"

"It's not great. She paid a big piece of the mortgage. And now Sarah's decided she's not coming back from London, so that's the other room empty. And of course we can't forget my bampot brother, who's got himself thrown in jail. What the hell were you boys doing?"

"It was some scheme of Rab's. We were supposed to just be defacing a sign, but then this building blew up, and the police chased us, and everything went to hell." Stefan zipped up his jacket. "So the police have been by looking for me, eh?"

"No," said Fiona, "they don't know anything about you. They were asking questions about Peter. Knowing him, he hasn't said anything to them about you, or Rab, either, though for everyone's betterment he should just hand him over to them."

"I can't argue with that," he agreed, taking off his jacket. "So what are we going to do, I mean, about the flat?"

"*We?* That's nice of you. Honestly, Ste, I have no idea what we're going to do." She pinched her forehead. "The bar's closed down, so I'm not working. Roddy's hardly in a position to help out — he can't tell his arse from his elbow half the time. The lodgers are gone. Now Peter's not working, either. I've called an estate agent who's going to help me sell the flat. And we need a lawyer for Peter. Barry knows someone who's willing to represent him, but he'll still have to be paid."

"Oh, man. Have there been any charges against him yet?" asked Stefan.

"No. That's the only good news. They're not going to be able to hold him much longer if they don't produce some charges. If they do, though, we're bugged, because this is pretty serious." Fiona stood up and patted down a tuft of Stefan's hair. "You look like crap on toast, Ste. Go get some sleep, then later on you can get cleaned up and we'll figure out what to do."

"Thanks, Fi," he said, getting up and kissing her on the forehead. He went to the bedroom, half-expecting to see Peter there. Peter's clothes, books, and the random objects he'd collected were strewn about the room. Fiona had evidently started packing a box in here but given up. *He never throws anything out*, thought Stefan, picking up a snail shell from the dresser. He felt the urge to cry. *I miss him*, he thought. He laughed as he looked at the floor, where two months' worth of newspapers lay in a corner. Peter had set aside the one that mentioned the riot his father's play started in Rome.

The play, thought Stefan. The company was still performing it, and it seemed to be doing well. *Royalties!* he thought. Charlene did everything by the union rulebooks, so a percentage of the money taken at the door would be paid to the play's author. But since his father wasn't alive, it would go to...

Delonia.

Chapter Twenty-One

Myosotis

Stefan walked into the living room and dumped an armload of old newspapers on the floor. He tore out some pages and wrapped dishes, placing them one by one into a box. "I still want to go," he said to Fiona.

"Ste," said Fiona, stuffing a small lamp into another cardboard box, "if you visit Peter, they're going to question you. As long as you stay away, you're not implicated in any of this."

"But I am," he said, "and if I just went in and told them about Rab, they'd probably let him go."

"You know Peter doesn't want us to do that."

"I know," sighed Stefan.

Fiona stacked the box on top of several others in a corner of the room. "Help me roll up this rug," she said.

"I have to see him, Fi. I have to make an appointment. Where's the number?"

"You'll see him well enough if you end up in there with him. Is that what you want?"

She saw that he was serious. Nothing would make him happy except seeing Peter. She'd sensed the same thing in Peter when she visited him: both of them were somehow *more* when they were together. But she knew Peter would never ask for Stefan to visit if it would get him in trouble.

"Alright," she said, leaving the room. She called from the kitchen as she rummaged through her purse. "You can bring him some of his clothes while you're at it." She came back, handing him a torn slip with numbers on it.

He kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks, sis."

She rolled her eyes to the ceiling.

Stefan looked around. "Where's the phone?"

"It's disconnected. You'll have to use one on the street."

"Right. Be back in a few," he said. He ran out the door and down the tenement stairs. He was cold without a jacket, though many of the others on the street were dressed lightly and didn't seem to mind. He wondered at that difference as he searched for a pay-phone: back in Canada he spent half the year bundled up against the cold. Somehow the Scottish were immune or didn't care.

He was sure there was a phone booth around the corner from the flat, a big red metal one with little panes of glass. It was gone. He walked for another ten minutes until he found another one, a large plastic box stencilled with the logo of the telephone company he used to work for.

He spoke to a surprisingly friendly woman at the prison who offered to book him an appointment for the next day. Stefan agreed. He hesitated when she asked his name; he considered giving a false one, but realised that they'd want to see identification when he showed up. Since this was an official arrangement, he gave his full name. "Stefan Jackrabbit Mackechnie," he said.

"Oh," said the woman, "alright. Half-two tomorrow."

The electronic pips sounded, signalling that he was about to run out of time. He thanked the woman and hung up. *Phones are handy*, he thought. He wondered how he'd managed before. *Before, though, I could hear Peter. If only I could do that now.*

He imagined Peter in jail as he walked back to the tenement. Above the outside door was an estate agent's sign with a "Sold" sticker across it, and their flat number underneath. Stefan went through the door and climbed up the concrete steps, running his hand along the Forties-era tiles on the walls.

"Got an appointment?" Fiona asked as he closed the door.

He nodded. "Tomorrow afternoon."

"Did you talk to him?"

His face dropped. "I didn't know I could."

She stroked his arm. "It's okay, you'll see him tomorrow. That'll be better. Why don't you go pick out some clothes to bring him?"

He nodded and went to his and Peter's room. He dug through the drawers, feeling funny about handling Peter's underwear. He took two pairs of trousers, two jumpers, and a pile of T-shirts. He folded it all into a pile and carried it out to the living room. Holding them out, not sure what to do, he looked at Fiona. "I miss him," he said.

"I miss him, too," she said. She hugged him, pinning the clothes between them as if they were Peter.

He cried hard, his stomach spasming as he tried to catch his breath. He leaned his cheek on the top of her head. "Things are bad," he whispered into her hair.

"What's happenin' here?" asked Roddy, standing in the doorway with the baby in his arms. Fiona walked over to him, took the baby, and went to her bedroom. Stefan took the clothes to his room and shut the door. Roddy stood in the living room, confused.

~

Stefan waited in the drizzle for a bus to arrive. A woman stood between him and the timetable; he peered over her shoulder at the tiny black numbers on the yellow sheet in the frame. The times were listed in 24-hour format, which always confused him.

He desperately needed to pee, but wasn't sure if he had time to use the public toilet. After waiting another minute, he decided to chance it. He ran up the steps and into the tiny square concrete building. These 'cottages' were strange to him — a considerate convenience, but something he'd never seen in Canada. Even here they seemed to be regarded as old-fashioned, and were shrouded in lurid stories about the goings-on that happened inside. As he unzipped his fly and walked up to room-wide metal trough, Stefan looked around, partly shy, partly curious. Satisfied there was no one else in the building, he closed his eyes.

He opened them to find himself outdoors. The cottage was gone. He stood with his thumbs crooked down his zipper, and peed into empty space as the last of the passengers got on the bus, looking back at him, along with all the others who watched from the two tiers of windows. Today, he didn't care. He smiled at them and finished his business, shook, then tucked himself away and zipped up. He was going to see Peter, and nothing else mattered. Unfolding the timetable from his pocket, he figured out another route to Her Majesty's Prison, Saughton. He headed down the street in the direction of the bus stop for his new route. He'd had the whole morning to prepare, he chided himself, yet here he was, running late. He hitched the small backpack full of clothes higher on his back and jogged.

A shop caught his eye and he stopped. Its whitewashed front was trimmed with shiny black paint, and its large windows, hand-painted with gold lettering, were filled with thousands of candies and chocolates. He realised they were all hand-made, something he'd never seen before. *That would be nice, he thought, to bring Peter some candy.*

He opened the door, startled when it rang a bell. He stepped inside and looked around. The tiny shop was filled with glass counters, each of them displaying endless variations on a sugar theme. There were drops of orange, green, yellow, and red, fudges in white, pink, beige, and brown, and endless rows of chocolate rosettes, circles, squares, and ovals. He leaned across a counter to look at a price list, then heard a smacking noise and gasped, realising he wasn't alone.

Two women sat in the corner of the room with boxes on their laps, their bodies thin and shrivelled as if they once held much larger people who'd deflated as they aged. Their hair looked like ashtray-flavoured candy floss. They took turns putting chocolates into their mouths, one after the other. As their lips parted, Stefan saw that one of them had three remaining teeth, black and spaced far apart, and the other had two.

Stefan smiled at them. "Hello," he said.

"What d'yeh want?" asked the three-toothed crone.

"Uh, I'm visiting a friend. I wanted to buy them a gift."

Their eyes opened wider. “D’yeh want t’bring a spaycial gift?” asked Two-Teeth, standing up slowly, interested.

“Eff she’s en the hohspital, we kin give yeh sumthen t’make ’er baytter — eff yuu tell us wot she’s got,” said Three-Teeth, joining her.

“Mibbe yeh want sumthen t’make yersel irresistibile. Ivryone aroond will notice yeh, want t’get to know yeh, ask yeh quaystions aboot yersel — mibbe luvv yeh even.”

Stefan laughed. “I don’t want that — not where I’m going!” He thought for a moment. “Wait a second. How about the opposite? Do you have anything that would make people ignore me, forget about me?”

The women smiled and their eyes crinkled shut. They scuttled out to the back room through a small wooden door. They returned a minute later with an aluminium pan held between them full of small chocolate knots.

“How much are they?” asked Stefan.

“Two quid each!” snapped Three-Teeth.

Stefan searched through his pocket. He needed bus-fare to get to the prison on time, but he could walk back, and not eat until he got home. “I can only afford one,” he said to the women.

Their faces crinkled as if they’d sucked a bad candy. Finally, Two-Teeth said, “Fine.” She deftly tore a piece of red tissue from behind the counter, plucked a chocolate from the tray, and, producing a piece of blue ribbon from somewhere, whirled everything into a small paper packet. She held it out to him and he took it carefully from her pointy-tipped fingers.

Stefan put his money on the counter, thanked them, and exited the shop, startled again by the bell on the way out.

~

The meeting room wasn’t what Stefan had imagined. He’d pictured a concrete room divided by a long glass wall with telephone receivers on either side. Instead, he found himself in a room with skylights and wooden accents. He might have considered it a cheery cafeteria if he hadn’t been body-searched on the way in. He left the backpack full of clothes with someone official, and had to unwrap the candy for inspection, as well as show his passport as identification.

The official noticed something written beside Stefan’s name on his list. “Someone will be here to ask you a few questions when you’ve finished meeting with Mister Hailes.”

“Okay,” said Stefan. They led him to a table where he waited.

Peter emerged from a door, wearing a plain, loose outfit Stefan figured was a uniform, and carried a crinkled supermarket carry-bag filled with something. He smiled when he saw Stefan and rushed over. Stefan was happy to see there were no leg-irons and that there were no signs of any kind of beating.

They hugged, then sat down at the table. For the next minute, they could do little more than grin and laugh at each other.

“I brought you some clothes,” said Stefan. “I left them with the inspection people. They said they’d get them to you.”

“Thanks, Ste.”

“Don’t you have to wear this uniform thing, though?”

“No, it’s just ‘cause they sent my clothes and shoes off for inspection. They had paint on them. So did my hands. At first I was only supposed to be committed for a few days, but when they matched that up to the paint on the sign, and — well, add that to my running away then surrendering, and there’s a pretty solid case against me.”

“It’s still not over, Peter. Fiona’s got a lawyer lined up. How long is it until you get a trial?”

“Could be a few months. Maybe up to a year.”

“Peter, if you just tell them about—”

Peter grabbed Stefan's hand and looked over his shoulder. "But I'm not going to. I'm not what's important here. You've seen what's happening. You've got to stop it somehow. Maybe you should talk to *our friend* and see if he can help."

Stefan mouthed Rab's name.

Peter nodded. He laughed and leaned back in his seat, still holding Stefan's hand. "I can't believe you came here, you daft bastard." Stefan looked at their clasped hands. "Och, stop worrying. Nobody cares. It's a prison, for Chrissakes."

"So nobody—?" Stefan nodded his head from side to side. "You know, showers and stuff?"

"Ste, I'm not technically in prison yet, I'm on remand. It's pretty crowded in here, so they've got me stuck in a dank old wee cell."

"So it's not all like this?" he tilted his head at the skylights above.

Peter laughed. "No. This is just nice PR. Or maybe it's for the sake of people's families. Ach, it's not so bad."

"Peter, come on. We're going to get you out of here somehow."

"So who's going to pay for this fancy lawyer?"

"It's a friend of your brother's, and I'm going to pay him."

"With what?"

"With money from my show."

"I thought that was gone."

"The Edinburgh money is gone, but it's been selling out all over the place. Last night I heard about a riot in Chicago, so that means there's more than one theatre company doing it now. There'll be residuals coming in from that, so I just have to call my mother."

"You're going to call your mum? That's quite a change of heart."

Stefan smiled. "That's exactly what it is, Peter. I think I have you to thank for that."

"Ach, you didn't need me. You could have got over your thing with her anytime."

"I don't think so. I mean, I actually *want* to call her now. With everything that's been going on, you being in here and all, I kinda feel like I need her. She's the strongest person I know."

"I'm happy for you, Ste," said Peter, giving Stefan's hand a squeeze.

"Oh," said Stefan, "I brought you something." He pulled out the opened tissue with the chocolate inside.

"It's opened. Couldn't you have waited till you got here? What is it? Looks like a chocolate pretzel."

"I bought it from these women who said that it would make people forget who you are. If you ate it, you could just walk out of here."

"And how far do you think I'd get? Where would I go? They still don't know anything about you, do they?"

"No," he admitted.

"So it's yours. You've got things to do."

Stefan nodded. Peter was right. He took his from the crinkly red paper. "Here goes."

"Wait," said Peter, "this is for you." He held out the poly bag. Stefan took it and reached inside, pulling out handfuls of paper curls. "They're from your dad."

"Holy—"

"Yeah, he's been keeping busy. I still have no idea what they are, but they've been there every morning. Then two days ago, they just stopped. I guess that's all of it."

"Whatever it is."

"Okay, better eat your thing and get out of here. I just — I don't want to forget that you visited."

"I have an idea," said Stefan, popping the chocolate into his mouth. He leaned over the table and kissed Peter. The warders looked alarmed and started toward them, but Stefan stayed where he was, letting the chocolate melt and flow down his throat. A second later, the guards stopped and looked around distractedly.

Stefan broke contact with Peter's lips. "I love you," he whispered.
Peter opened his eyes. He blinked, then smiled. "I love you, too," he whispered back.
Stefan grabbed the plastic bag, waved, then let himself out the exit.

~

Stefan tried to call home again. The money he'd borrowed from Fiona was getting low, and he didn't want to leave another message. He was about to hang up, but there was a click on the line: someone picked up the receiver on the other end.

"Hello?" said Stefan.

"Stefan," said a voice. It wasn't his mother. *Cerise*. "Stefan, you have to stop calling here. You're upsetting Delonia terribly."

"I just need to talk to her. Could you put her on?"

"Stefan, she — she doesn't want to talk to you."

"But I need—"

"She told me to tell you to call Helen."

"Okay, I will. But could you—"

"I'm sorry," said Cerise, and she hung up.

Stefan uncrumpled the sheet of telephone numbers Charlene had printed out for him months before. He'd accepted it at the time, embarrassed that she'd even put his mother's telephone number on it. He traced his finger along and found Helen's number, along with the international dialling code he'd need. *You're brilliant, Charlene, wherever you are*, he thought. He popped the rest of his coins into the telephone and dialled Helen's work number. Doing some quick addition, he figured she would have just started work.

"Hello?" asked her familiar croaky voice.

"Hello, Helen," he said.

"Oh my God!" she said. "It's you!"

"It's me," he said, laughing. It made him happy to think of Helen, to be talking to her. "My mother won't speak to me. She said I should talk to you."

"Yes, it's damn well time you did. Hey, you're a wealthy man, did you know that?"

"I swear I did not."

"This play of your father's — it's like a revolution. People are walking out all over the place. There are protests and rallies and parliamentary debates — and best of all, there are residuals pouring in from all the different productions around the world. Your mother doesn't want the money. She set up an account and asked me to put all the residuals into it for you, because she figured that at some point you'd run out of money."

"Well, she's partly right — I am out of money — but not because I've pissed it away like she probably thinks."

The electronic pips told Stefan he was running out of time. He fumbled through his pocket for a pen.

"Helen, I'm running out of time. Could you maybe give me the numbers for that account?"

"You bet. Let me just find them. They're here on my desk here somewhere." She found them and barely finished reading them out when the final pips came.

"ThankyouHelenbyebye!" he said as they were cut off.

I'm broke, he thought as the coins fell inside the telephone. *I'm rich*, he countered, looking at the piece of paper in his hands. Once that would have made him very happy. All he cared about now was trading that money for Peter's freedom.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Expansion and Contraction

“Ow,” said Mairi, pulling back her finger. She stuck it into her mouth to suck away the blood. Morton didn’t break his stride. “All good lobby-art,” he said, “is dangerous and extremely expensive. It lets everyone know you’re serious.”

“Yes, sir,” said Mairi.

He stopped and faced her. “Do you know why I hired you as my personal assistant?”

“Em, to—”

“To ensure that my time is used to maximal efficiency. I am this company’s most valuable and most expensive resource.” He ran a hand through his swept-back hair. “Since this is your first day, I’ll give you some leeway. Beginning tomorrow, though, I’ll expect nothing less than perfection in your handling of my details. Do you understand?”

“Yes I do, Mister Morton.”

“Good, because if you slip up, I’ll have you killed.”

Mairi held her clipboard to her chest. “Sir?”

“What?”

“You just said you would have me killed.”

“No, I’m sure I didn’t. I said I would have you fired.”

“Em, yes, of course.”

Morton strode away toward his private office lift. Mairi followed a few steps behind. The door closed behind them, sealing them in what felt like an industrial refrigerator. When the door opened again, Mairi squinted in the morning light that shone into Morton’s office through a vast wall of windows. Below were the spires, steeples, and angled roofs of the Old Town.

“Look at that,” he sneered, “the decay of it. In its time, it was a wonder, but then the progress all just stopped.” He turned to her. “We need to bring this city up to speed. We can make it relevant again, the envy of all Europe. Nobody has done anything with any — if you’ll pardon the expression — with any balls in centuries.”

Mairi lowered her clipboard. “But what about the Museum of Scotland, and the new parliament?”

“Small scale, Maura—”

“Mairi.”

“These were one-offs. The parliament? Really? The half-baked doodles of an impractical Spaniard who’s now dead. What would have happened with the parliament if we hadn’t stepped in to rescue them? Finishing the project was just their first hurdle, but then dealing with all the flaws, figuring out how to maintain the thing — they were just not prepared. And why? Why is that? *Vision*, Maura. These people are managers, but I’m a visionary. In the past this city knew real vision, and it’s time again for someone with a vision for its future.”

Mairi nodded idly, looking at the metal stalagmite sculptures around the room.

“Could you write that down? What I said about vision. That’ll be useful somewhere.”

“Yes, sir,” she answered, swinging open her clipboard and scribbling.

“That’s all. Print off my day’s itinerary, and get me something to eat for lunch.

Nothing in batter for heaven’s sake!”

“Yes, sir,” she said, scribbling some more.

He turned from the vast black slab that was his desk. “Could I reread those thoughts on vision?”

Mairi clutched the clipboard against her chest. “Let me go type them up properly for you, sir,” she insisted, heading for the lift before he could reply. Inside, she let the clipboard hang by her side. Across the top sheet were the words “Delusional elitist egomaniacal fascist bastard fuck.”

~

“Hello, John,” said Stefan, shaking John Hailes’s hand. John pulled him close, giving him a double-pat on the back.

“How’s my wee grandson?” asked John, reaching past Stefan for the baby as Fiona came up the walk.

“Heya, Dad,” said Fiona, handing over the baby.

“Och, he’s huge!” said John, pretending he could barely hold him. “What are you feeding him?”

She slapped her father lightly on the shoulder and turned back toward the car.

“C’mon, Roddy, bring it through here,” she said, as Roddy followed with a cardboard box.

“I’m really sorry to be putting you out,” said Stefan. “Fi didn’t expect the flat to sell so quickly. I can stay someplace else, though, because—” he started to gesture toward the house, but stopped himself, realising he was about to suggest that it was small. It *was* small, a box of a council house with bumpy white pebbled walls and two small front windows, plopped at an oblique angle on a street lined from end to end with identical houses.

“No, you’ll stay here with us, lad. You’re family,” he said with a wink. Stefan smiled, reminded of countless uncomfortable moments in which his mother demonstrated her ‘coolness’ about his romantic life.

~

By nightfall, they’d moved their everyday things into the house and stacked the rest in closets and the small shed in the back garden. John made a simple meal for them of potatoes, parsnips, and pork chops. It hadn’t occurred to Stefan to mention that he was vegetarian — or, rather, that his mother was, and he’d become one by proxy. Instead, he kept quiet and tucked into his food. He loved John for his simple goodness, and felt sad to think of him making endless dinners here to eat by himself. John was clearly happy for the company.

Throughout dinner, Stefan noticed Fiona looking at Roddy as he picked another pork chop from the centre plate without asking, or drank from a beer bottle while the rest of them drank water or milk. Stefan knew the look on her face, though Roddy wasn’t paying enough attention to see it, and she likely didn’t realise she was showing it. Ming looked at him this way shortly before telling him that it was over between them.

Heart tissue, he read once, never regenerates once it’s damaged. He wondered how long it would be before she told Roddy he had to go.

All John, Fiona, and Stefan were concerned with was Peter’s upcoming trial. Barry sent his regrets that he couldn’t make it back, but assured them that his lawyer friend was the man to help them. They were scheduled to meet him the next day.

~

The meeting took place in an upscale restaurant in the New Town. Stefan had money now, and wanted to treat Barry’s lawyer friend well, to make Peter’s case his utmost priority. The lawyer was a tall, stocky man with thin ginger hair and a young boy’s face. He was warm and friendly, and had none of the cruelty Stefan witnessed in Barry’s other friends at the wedding. Better still, the lawyer believed he could help Peter.

“Admittedly,” said the lawyer, “Peter did turn himself in the day of the explosion. But he never explicitly said that he caused the explosion, that day or since.”

“But the paint?” asked Stefan.

“It places him at the scene, yes. There’s definitely grounds for suspicion, and, if we’re not lucky, a charge of malicious mischief. But it’s not enough to conclusively prove that he blew up the building.”

"This is good," said Fiona, smiling and sitting back in her chair to sip her white wine. She'd commented when they'd first sat down that it was a nice restaurant. She hadn't said it, but Stefan got the intended irony, that they should be in such luxury on Peter's behalf while he sat in jail.

"The prosecuting lawyers are fairly convinced that he's not actually the one who did this."

"That's good, because he's not," said Stefan.

"Yes, well, the trial is about establishing that. If you know anything more, I'd love to hear it."

Stefan looked at Fiona, then shook his head.

"Alright," said the lawyer, unsure but not pressing. "Say they can't prove that he was responsible for the explosion, and say they decide there isn't enough evidence to proceed with any other charges. Then he'll be okay. Unless, of course, the police feel that he's involved in some kind of terr—" The lawyer's mobile phone made a warbling noise in his pocket. He took it out and read a text message on it. "I should get going," he said, holding up the mobile as his explanation. "Let's meet again later in the week to go over what we've got."

"Thanks," said Fiona.

"Thanks," said Stefan, shaking the lawyer's hand. Stefan sat as the lawyer left, then leaned over to Fiona. "Where can I find our friend Rab? I need to have a talk with him."

~

It didn't surprise Stefan to learn that Rab lived with his mother. Short months ago, he would have felt himself in no position to judge, but now everything was different.

Rab's mother gave Stefan a mobile number to call. To be safe, Stefan called Rab from a payphone. Stefan geared himself up for a confrontation, but Rab actually sounded glad to hear from him. "There's a meeting tonight," he told Stefan, "and you have to be there." He gave Stefan directions to the meeting-place.

That night, Stefan walked across town, following the directions, which were good up until the last piece of information. Rab gave him a street name and a building number, but the street ended before Stefan reached the address. The tarmac crumbled away to cobbles, which in turn were overgrown with grass. He could see a building ahead, but it looked abandoned. The light was failing, and he felt unsure. As little as he knew Rab, though, he figured this was exactly the kind of place he'd hold a meeting.

The building was solid, stately, and completely black, like a Greek temple that had been ransacked and burned. As he got closer, Stefan saw a fine green moss clinging to the blackness. He touched a pillar, running his hand over the rough stone then moved his hand onto the soft fur of the moss. The feel of it calmed him. He put his cheek against it. He wondered where the scratchman was. This seemed to be the kind of place he'd expect to find him, too. The thought didn't seem so scary anymore.

"Ste!" called a voice. He knew that it was Rab — trouble himself. Soon enough, he saw Rab's gangly frame coming toward him in the evening gloom.

"Alright?"

"Well, Rab, my boyfriend is in jail. Let's see. What else is going on? No, just that."

"Yeah, I'm real sorry about that. I didn't know what to do."

"How about trading places with him?"

"Ste, I can't do that right now. There are important things going on. Come inside and meet the others, and maybe you'll understand."

Stefan followed him around the back of the building. Rab got down on his belly and crawled his way through an empty basement window pane. His head vanished through the small opening, then his torso, legs, and finally his feet vanished. His hands re-emerged, summoning Stefan through.

Stefan was not usually claustrophobic, but this pushed him to a new limit. He hunkered down, then got on his belly. He stuck his hands through and Rab took them. Rab pulled and Stefan slid forward. Peter's puffy jacket, which Stefan still wore for sentimental reasons, left him wedged helplessly in the window for a moment while he wiggled on either end, but with a tug, Rab pulled him into the damp basement of the building, where he landed on a hard floor. He stood up, brushed off his knees and hands, and followed the faint light of the torch Rab produced.

They went up a set of stairs, and Stefan found himself in a lobby or lounge illuminated softly by lanterns, candles, and torches. He saw people, about twenty or thirty young men and women, sitting on old chaise longues, wingback chairs, or on the marble floor. On either side of the room was a large fireplace, but these were unlit, probably for fear of drawing attention.

"Sorry, everyone for the delay," said Rab. "This is Ste. He's come to join us."

"Well, uh, no, I haven't really," said Stefan.

"Come on," said Rab, "you know what's happening here in this city. Peter told me you could actually see it as it was happening."

"Look, I don't know what I've been seeing. Maybe I've just been imagining it."

"You know you're not imagining it," said a woman, stepping out of the darkness.

"And *I* know you're not, because I can see it, too."

"Ste," said Rab, "this is Mairi."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Vive!

“Do you really think Morton is all that dangerous?” asked Stefan. He sat beside Rab in a circle with the other men and women in the burnt temple building. As his eyes adjusted, he saw that the others weren’t all the would-be hippies he’d taken them for, but from different walks of life, young and old.

“You have no idea how dangerous he is,” said Mairi.

“So why am *I* here?” asked Stefan. “You seem pretty well-organised. What do you need me for?”

“Ste,” said Rab, “your play started a revolution, and it’s spreading. People are up in arms because of it. The only problem is that it *leaves* them there. It doesn’t give them anyplace to go. We want to help them see what we’re fighting against, and what we’re fighting for.”

“We’re being sold an idea of what our lives are about,” said Mairi. “But it’s some *company’s* idea. It’s got nothing to do with our lives or our culture.” She leaned forward on her fists. “You know what Morton said the other day? Morton keeps talking about his vision for the city, so in a meeting the other day someone finally asked him what that was. ‘Better shopping,’ he said, ‘and office space’. That’s it: shopping and office space.”

“Okay,” said Stefan, “granted it’s not exactly inspiring, but that’s his business. So his biggest crime is believing his own spin.”

“No, Ste,” said Mairi, “what’s worst about this guy is that he has the means to make it happen. He wants to turn this beautiful old city into — well, a *mall*. And he’s doing it. Anyone in power who doesn’t fit his vision gets replaced with someone who does. His money makes him a lot of friends. Sure, some people can’t be bought, but that doesn’t stop him. Say he makes an offer on your building and you hold out for too long. Well, you’re gonna find yourself holding a fire sale pretty soon.”

“So we’re thinking,” said Rab, “that if you came up with another play, that might—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” said Stefan, standing up. “That wasn’t my play, it was my father’s.”

“Ste, come on, you know how to make it happen. Please,” Rab implored. “You’ve seen what’s happening here. If we don’t do this, we’re going to lose everything. Why did you come all this way to be here if you don’t care about it, if you don’t appreciate what makes it special?”

“We’ve *both* seen what’s happening,” said Mairi, standing up and taking his hand, “and you know what? That’s *nothing*.” An idea struck her as she looked at him. “I’m going to take you to work with me tomorrow, and then you’ll understand the scale of what’s coming. If that doesn’t convince you, then we’ll agree to leave you alone.” She looked to Rab.

Rab nodded. “Right. And if you’re not convinced, I’ll go to the police and turn myself in. Then you’ll have Peter back, and you can run away somewhere where this isn’t happening — if you can find it.”

Stefan was stunned. “Okay,” he said. The people around the room nodded their heads, and some clapped their hands.

“Alright,” said Rab.

~

The next morning, Ste dressed in his best suit and caught a bus into the city centre. As the bus crested a hill, the Old Town rose in front of him like a stone crown. At the next stop, Stefan stepped from the bus, saying, “Thank you, Driver”. His heart soared as he stood in the morning sunlight, which was so bright it banished the usual winter grey.

He walked along Princes Street. Every building contained a shop, and at least half of them were the same shops he’d left behind in Toronto. As he looked up, Stefan saw that some of the buildings still had had elaborate fronts, but above street level. Where he walked, it seemed every attempt had been made to erase any distinguishing features.

He stopped in front of an old department store, marvelling at the detailed masonry above. Four female sandstone figures stood with their arms over their heads, as if holding up the building. As Stefan watched, each of the young women faltered, losing their grip on the stone. One by one, they lost their footing, too, and tipped forward. Their faces looked horrified, and their mouths were wide with silent shrieks. Stefan covered his head and jumped backward, yelling “Heads up!” to the people around him on the pavement. But halfway down, the women turned to sand and were diffused by a gust of wind. A few of the shoppers who heard Stefan stopped to look up. They blinked and coughed, then threw annoyed looks at him before moving on. The places where the women once stood in the façade were now just four empty recesses. Scaffolding stood just below, and on it was a sign: “Restoration by Morton”.

Stefan brushed himself off and continued down the street. A few doors further, he passed a crater-like construction site which was partially hidden by wooden hoarding. Whatever Georgian building originally stood in that spot, it had been reduced to rubble. The airbrushed picture on the hoarding showed that it was to be replaced with a cube of concrete and glass. A plastic sign declared “Future home of another Morton development”.

He’s everywhere, thought Stefan. It was as if Morton had got into the water-table. Even in the time since Stefan arrived, the man seemed to have touched everything.

He walked to the far end of Princes Street, where Mairi waited for him. She was dressed much more formally than the last time he’d seen her. “You look nice,” he said.

“Everyone pitched in to help me buy these clothes when I got the job at Morton’s office. I couldn’t afford to dress like this on my own, but he demands it of his staff.”

“Right. Do I look okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, smashing,” she said. She pointed for him to cross the street. They walked through the gate into Princes Street Gardens.

A figure stood inside the gate, an old black brass military man on horseback. “Good morning, madam,” he said to Mairi, touching the brim of his tall bearskin hat and tipping his head. Mairi waved a dismissive hand at him. Stefan saluted him, and he saluted back. Only a moment later did it occur to Stefan that it was odd for her to see and hear the figure, too.

They walked down through the gardens, passing a huge fountain made of base metal painted gold. Animals and fish frolicked in it, but Mairi had no time for them, either.

“Can we stop for a second?” asked Stefan.

“No, or we’ll be late. Do you really want to look at that thing?” she snipped at him.

“Well, yeah.”

“Ste, just because something’s old doesn’t make it *good*.”

“Yeah, but — wait,” he said, touching her arm. She stopped and looked at him.

“What am I going to this office with you for, if it’s not to save things like that fountain?”

“Look, some of us want to save it all, while others, like me, think we simply need to be more selective about what we replace. I just don’t trust the selection process Morton is using. My background is in art, so I — I don’t know, I’d like to think I have a certain sense of taste about these things. And *that*,” she said, pointing at the fountain, “is in bad taste, whenever it’s from.” She continued walking.

“I kinda like it,” he said. A golden fish jumped from its highest point as Stefan turned and ran after Mairi.

~

Mairi sat Stefan in the lobby then took the lift to Morton’s office. A few minutes later, the lift door opened again. Morton stepped out, followed by a squat round man in a grey suit whom Stefan recognised as the Lord Provost. Mairi followed behind the two men, writing instructions from Morton on a clipboard as he spoke them to her over his shoulder. She followed them as far as the revolving door, but when they stepped into it, she turned back to Stefan. He joined her as she grumbled under her breath about Morton.

"The Lord Provost is like the mayor, right? Is it appropriate for him to be having private meetings with Morton?"

She shrugged her shoulders as she pushed the button for the lift. "He doesn't really do 'appropriate'."

The lift carried them to the office. Stefan was amazed at the view. The art — the metal stalagmites scattered around the floor, and a wall hanging like a tar-pool sprinkled with gold-leaf — struck him as ugly and frightening, but he put his hands on the windows and sighed at the view.

"Uh, if you could not touch anything," said Mairi, lifting his hands, spraying the marks where they'd been and wiping the glass with paper towel.

The lift door opened again and Stefan jumped. "It's okay," said Mairi. Three staff members emerged, one of them pushing a cart. Mairi nodded to them, and they busied themselves with various details of Morton's office, smoothing his leather chair, rearranging the biscuits on his desk, setting out a glass of water, then testing its temperature with a thermometer.

"We have fifteen minutes before he comes back," said Mairi, re-checking her clipboard. "Come with me," she said. She led him through a door at the far side of the office into a boardroom. Along the entire length of the table was a model of Edinburgh. Stefan was amazed at its detail, but when he leaned in to take a closer look, was puzzled to see that everything seemed to be frozen in ice. Then he realised that what covered and filled the old buildings wasn't meant to be ice, but glass. He poked the model with a finger, touching a tiny building. As he did, it collapsed like a cigarette ash. He stood up and looked at the dust on his finger.

"Hello?" said a voice. Mairi and Stefan turned to see Morton in the doorway.

"Ah, sir, you're back early," said Mairi.

"Yes I am," said Morton. "Who's this?"

"Uh, this is, this is your 9:35."

Stefan glared at her.

"And who might you be?" asked Morton, extending a hand.

"Stefan Mackechnie," answered Stefan, accepting it.

A startled look flashed across Morton's face for a second, but he quickly covered it.

"What can I do for you?"

"I represent a small group of conservation societies here in—"

"No you don't," said Morton. He turned on Mairi. "Why did you let him in here?"

"Wait a minute Mister Morton. She—"

"No, I'm sorry, *you* wait a minute. This is my office, and you're not welcome here."

"You don't even know who I am," argued Stefan.

"I know very well who you are. You're the one who put on that play here this summer, the one that started the riots. You have no idea how expensive that was for me. And then one of my buildings was attacked by some kind of militants, probably as a direct result of your father's lunatic ideas."

"My fa—?"

"I went to school with Robert Mackechnie. I recognised his name when I heard it associated with that *play* —" he mocked the word — "this summer. You're the spit and image of him. We were good friends in school, but then he completely lost the plot and went off to Canada, where he met that—"

Stefan lunged at him, but Morton reacted quickly, pushing him back against the table with a hand on his throat. The hand was so cold it instantly gave Stefan a headache, and he felt the heat leaching out of his body. He couldn't bear to touch the man's hand to pull it away.

Mairi hit Morton in the head with the glass of water from his desk. Its contents splashed over his expensive suit, but the glass didn't break. Morton was startled enough to let go of Stefan, but not incapacitated. He turned on Mairi, grabbing her by the arm. "You're

with them, aren't you? I knew I shouldn't have trusted you." He headed for the lift, jerking her along behind him.

Stefan got up from the table but the lift's door closed before he reached it. It took an eternity to return. When it did, Stefan felt the buttons. The one marked 'B' was so cold his finger stuck to it. He pressed it repeatedly and rode the lift down. When the door opened, he ran out into a small storage area with rough brick walls. He saw light coming from a door ahead and ran toward it.

The door opened into a small courtyard with a brick wall around it. Scattered around the space were remnants of the vanishing city — post-boxes, telephone booths, hand-painted storefront signs, and an old police box. Morton dragged Mairi to the police box, opened its door, and threw her in.

The fire door slammed shut behind Stefan. Morton turned and saw him. Stefan fumbled with the handle, but it was locked.

Morton pushed the door of the police box closed and leaned against the box with both hands. While Mairi screamed and yelled inside, he calmly closed his eyes and breathed deeply, then opened them again and walked away from the box.

Frost appeared on the panels of the police box, a wooden cabinet the size of two telephone booths painted countless times with shiny blue paint. The frost spread, hiding the box's original colour behind a veneer of white. The frost grew denser, turning to thick ice. The ice then smoothed itself along geometric planes, hardening into mirrored glass. The entire booth was reformed, modernised.

"You want to stay in the golden past?" Morton asked him. "Are you one of those ones who wants to live in a museum, an antique shop? You're forgetting something: what about slavery? What about *plagues*?" Morton smiled at him. "Your father had the same ideas as you. He wrote foolish songs and ran off to be a minstrel. But I won, didn't I? He loved this place, but he couldn't stand what it was becoming, so he ran away. I, on the other hand, I hated it, growing up here in this broken-backed culture, with all its twee little habits and customs. But I stayed. Your father was a singer, playing his instruments, making up songs, dabbling in the past. But what could I do? Well, I discovered what I could do: I could *change* things. People don't want all this old stuff. Not really. They feel like they *should* keep it, but they don't know what's for. I found out that if I could offer people the things they really wanted, things they could buy and have right now, then they'd let me change anything else I wanted."

"You don't know what you're doing," said Stefan. He took a step forward, trying to figure out how to free Mairi from the glass-petrified box.

"Don't I?" asked Morton. "I hate this place. And I want it gone." He extended a finger and touched the police box. The glass wavered like the water of a mirage, then vanished.

"No!" shouted Stefan, lunging forward. But Morton pointed a finger at him, and Stefan stopped. He moved slowly forward. As he walked past the post-boxes, telephone booths, and old signs, they lost their substance like a fog, then curled back into place once he'd passed.

"Why don't you just leave?" asked Stefan. "Leave it all alone?"

"When I'm finished here, I daresay I will," said Morton. "I'm thinking Paris next. I'm *progress*, Stefan, and you can't fight progress."

At the far side of the courtyard, Stefan saw something move in the dead grass. It twitched and jumped. *A jackrabbit*. It scurried up a pile of detritus and hopped through the only window in the wall that wasn't bricked up. Stefan darted around Morton and chased after the rabbit, scrambling over a pile of doors and bricks, then dropping into the garden of a tenement. The rabbit was gone, but the close ahead was open. He saw his escape, and took it.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Peter's Trials

Stefan walked in the cold rain. Mister Hailes offered to drive him to the prison when he went with Fiona that afternoon, but Stefan said he'd meet them there. It wasn't a day for walking, but he needed to clear his head, which still echoed with Mairi's screams and Morton's words. On foot as opposed to riding in a bus, there was more detail and a lot more distance in-between landmarks. Stefan grew hungry, and stopped at the only place to eat along the way, a fast-food restaurant.

The air was hot and moist with grease. Behind the counter was a tiled white kitchen full of machine noises, beeps, and the voices of teenagers yelling instructions back and forth. Stefan stepped up to the counter and looked at the plastic menu-board. In the past, he would have delighted at slighting his mother by eating in such a place. Today, it gave him no pleasure.

Unable to think clearly enough to put together the pieces of a fast-food lunch, Stefan ordered a children's meal.

"Is this for a child?" asked the young cashier behind the counter. "They're for under-twelves."

Stefan looked around. "It's for her," he said to the cashier, pointing at a child who bounced up and down at a plastic table next to her mother. The cashier nodded and put his order through. Before Stefan finished paying, another teenager delivered his lunch to the counter in a colourful cardboard box with a handle. Stefan took it and walked past the girl and her mother, then sat on his own.

He unfolded the top of the box, letting out the heat trapped inside. His hamburger was wrapped in paper. He lifted it out of the box and found a toy underneath it, a little doll with a dress of rough blue material and floppy arms and legs sewn from something slick and pink. Its little face looked up at him from under yellow yarn hair, stupidly joyful.

Two words popped into Stefan's head: *Fai Lok*.

~

Ji's shift at the factory was almost finished. Sometime before dawn, she'd walked here from her home, where she lived alone. "Home" was an exaggeration. It was a small shack at the edge of a wood in a remote part of China. When work was finished, she'd walk back through a path in the woods. It would be dark, but then, it had been dark in the morning, too. Supper would be modest, as her pay from the factory was a fraction of what it cost to live, even out here. She had no other choice: everyone worked at the factory now, except for a few shopkeepers. The town no longer bore any resemblance to the place where she'd grown up.

She turned the tiny doll in her hands, tucking in the folds of its foot and holding it under the sewing machine. She knew there was something bad in its skin. *The pink*. Something about that pink. Others complained of headaches, and some fainted. She pressed on, though, ignoring her body's complaints. She was number eight of the factory's top ten employees, and made marginally more because of it. They'd only switched to producing these dolls recently, and already she'd made thousands of them.

Who do they go to? she wondered. She wasn't sure whether to wish them well or to curse them. She imagined a little girl getting the toy, and chided herself for thinking something so harsh.

The thread in her sewing machine caught, then jammed, stopping completely. She looked around and saw that everyone had stopped working. Heads in kerchiefs turned all around her. Faces examined each other for clues.

Ji looked up at the roof, which was like the upturned bottom of a container ship hung with rows of fluorescent lights. The lights flickered. One of the bulbs sparked, and the room

went dark. Someone shouted with surprise, then voices muttered. Ji held her breath. Everything went quiet.

A blackness swept through the forest as the sun went down. Where the factory had been, there was now nothing but a clearing in the woods. The factory and the people ceased to be. The town ceased being some time before.

~

“Scuse me, sir,” said a voice, “yeh cannae kip here. Yeh’ll hafta sleep somewheres else.”

Stefan looked up at the spotty-faced teenager. The expression on the young man’s face changed as he saw that Stefan wasn’t a vagrant, and he hadn’t been asleep. He’d simply been thinking about something, and was crying about it.

Stefan nodded, had a final sip of the fizzy black sugar-water in his waxed cup, and stood. He picked up the doll from his lunch, held it close to his chest, then put it in his pocket and walked out into the rain.

Whatever was happening to Edinburgh, Stefan thought, was happening elsewhere, too. Perhaps every place in the world had a potential Morton in it. He shook the thought from his head: he couldn’t think about that right now. He was going to see Peter, and that’s what mattered.

~

“Where *is* he?” said Mister Hailes. He held Peter’s hand unashamedly, which Stefan liked. Peter bumped the baby on his knee, holding it with his other hand. Fiona drummed her fingernails on the window.

“Could you stop that, Fi?” asked Peter.

“Sorry,” she said, putting a nail in her mouth.

“I went to traffic court once,” said Stefan, wanting to break the tension. The others looked at him in a way that suggested he hadn’t been successful.

“Here he is,” said Fiona.

The lawyer patted down his hair as he walked to their table. “Sorry I’m late,” he said, “but there’s a good reason. There’s been...” He trailed off, not sure how to proceed.

“This doesn’t sound good,” said Peter. “Spit it out.”

The lawyer drew his breath. “The trial’s been delayed because there’s new evidence. It’s to do with a mobile phone.”

Peter stopped jostling the baby. Fiona reached across the table and took it back.

“Apparently a mobile was recovered at the train station, a phone that belonged to a developer in town who died at a construction site under circumstances that haven’t yet been ruled out for foul play. A few months’ worth of records for that number are mysteriously missing from the service provider’s records, but they still had the last few calls on file. Here they are,” he said, dropping a printout on the table.

“That’s my number,” said Fiona, examining it, “and this one’s Dad’s.”

Peter grimaced. “You’ll find Rab on there as well,” he said.

“So you’re aware of this?” asked the lawyer.

“I had the phone. I found it.”

“Peter,” said Stefan, “Rab gave you that phone. Don’t take this on yourself.”

“But Rab found it,” said Peter. “He found it at a construction site where he wasn’t supposed to be, and he gave it to me because I didn’t have one. He thought he was being generous.”

The lawyer folded up the printout and put it back into his jacket. “You’re due at the Sheriff Court on Friday. They want to take a statement about this new evidence. It does look pretty suspicious, first you being implicated up in that sabotaged building, then this link to the death of a developer. Obviously, they want to hear your explanation. I won’t be surprised if

there are new charges added to your case, which just makes the trial more complicated.” The lawyer stood up. “I’ll be back tomorrow to talk to you about your statement, then I’ll be with you in court in three days.”

“Thanks,” said Peter. He shook the lawyer’s hand, and then the man left.

“Bugger,” said Mister Hailes.

“So I’ve got the mobile of a dead man and it looks like I blew up a building — how hard can they be on me?”

“Peter—” started Fiona. “Oh,” she said, “you were joking.”

“Yes, Fiona. I can see full well how screwed I am.”

“Hey,” said Peter, “do you think Stefan and I could have some time to ourselves? There’s not much time left.”

“Sure,” said Mister Hailes. He put an arm around Fiona. “Meet you outside, Ste.”

When they’d left, Peter grabbed Stefan’s forearm. “I’m done for,” he said.

“What?”

“Ste, I really don’t think anyone’s going to believe me.”

“I’m sorry,” said Stefan.

“Why?”

“Rab offered to turn himself in if I wasn’t convinced by the proof he offered me. But I’ve seen it. I’ve met Morton, and I’ve seen what he can do. And I think this is happening all over.” He took Peter’s hand in his. “I’m really worried for you. Your trial won’t be for months, and this is all going to come together sooner than that. I can feel it. Things are speeding up. I went to see the chocolate witches today, but they were gone. It doesn’t matter if the warders pass my name on to the police — I don’t care about that now — but I was thinking that maybe if I brought more of those candies you and I could just walk out of here.”

Peter squeezed his hand. “That would be nice.”

“I don’t know what to do, Peter. I can’t find my father anywhere, and I really need some help with all this. It sounds crazy, since I came this far just to get away from her, but—”

“You want to talk to your mother.”

“Yeah, I do. But she won’t talk to me.”

“You should get that box back, the one you pawned.”

“Maybe.”

“You should. She said you should open it when you’d had a change of heart. Sounds like you have.”

“Okay,” said Stefan. He looked at Peter’s face and smiled. “I wish we had a handful of those chocolates. We could go out for a walk.”

“Have sex somewhere.”

Stefan laughed. “Yeah, I was thinking something like that. I want you back. I don’t want to wait for the trial. It’s too far away, and I don’t think we’ve got that long. I also don’t trust that the judges will see past how all this looks. We’ve got to do something to get you out.”

“It’s got to be Friday when I go to the court. After that, I’m back here for months, and there’ll be no way for me to get free.”

“Friday, then. I’ll think of something, and I’ll meet you at the courthouse.”

“Yeah. In the meantime, go back and see Kreel at the pawn shop and get your box back. It’s probably still there. Nobody ever buys anything from him.”

“Okay,” said Stefan, still smiling at him.

“Okay,” said Peter, doing the same in return.

Their hands locked across the table.

“I’m going now,” said Stefan.

“Doesn’t look like it.”

“Alright, maybe I’m not.”

The warder loomed above them. “Time’s up,” he said.

Peter stood up and rounded the table to hug Stefan tight. The warder pulled them apart. "Ach, you're just jealous," said Peter to the warder with a laugh. "Don't worry, there's plenty to go around. I still love you." He pointed a gun-finger at Stefan and shot it. "See ya, lover." The warder led him out a door through which Stefan was not allowed to follow.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Spirit-levelled

Stefan let go of the shop door and it swung shut with a clatter. Mister Kreel spun around behind his counter, looking at Stefan with one eye then twisting his head around to regard him with the other.

“Uh, good morning,” said Stefan.

“What d’yeh want?” asked the man.

Stefan produced a slip of paper from his pocket, his half of the pawn ticket. He held it out. “I gave you something a few weeks back. I’d like to claim it.”

Kreel held the paper out to the left side of his head and looked at it. His other eye was still trained on Stefan. “Hmph,” he grumbled, and handed the ticket back. “Yeh cannae have it.”

Stefan was prepared for a struggle. “You paid me a hundred and fifty pounds for it. I’m willing to give you two hundred to get it back.”

Kreel shook his head.

“Three hundred.”

Kreel shook his head again.

“Five hundred pounds.”

The man laughed, showing teeth like chipped ivory piano keys. “No. Yeh cannae have it because it’s no here anymore.”

Stefan paled. “Where is it?”

“I sold it.”

“To whom?”

“Ach, ah cannae tell yeh that. Ah could get in trouble if I telt yeh that.”

Stefan looked around the shop at the tarnished musical instruments, the old televisions, and the sound systems. The counter he leaned on, he noticed, was full of old watches and jewellery. On the counter was a record-book. Kreel saw him looking at it, and caught his eye, as much as he was able to. “What if,” said Stefan to the man, “I gave you the money anyway, and you went into the back just for a moment?”

“Ah *could* use some tea,” said Kreel.

Stefan pulled a roll of notes from his pocket and counted out a hundred pounds.

Weeks ago, it would have flattened him, but now he had access to the play’s royalties, he didn’t care about the money. He just wanted the box back, and with it, his mother.

Kreel left the counter, and Stefan leafed through the book. It took him several minutes to decipher Kreel’s handwriting, then to sort through the entries. Finally, he found one marked “Peruvian box” with the name “MacMillan” beside it. His heart sank: a surname wasn’t enough to go on. He’d just been had.

Kreel returned from the back of the store with a cup of tea. “Whups,” he said, reaching across to close the book, “ah shouldnae be leaving that open for all the world to see. People come in here and snoop around — yeh’d think this was the bloody *Royal Museum of Scotland*.”

There was something in the way Kreel stressed the words. Stefan looked up at Kreel, who nodded at him. Stefan smiled and nodded back.

“Thank you, Mister Kreel.”

“Nae bother,” said Kreel.

~

Stefan stopped at the museum’s information desk and asked for an employee named MacMillan. “He works in education services,” said the guide. Stefan asked where that was and got directions. He walked to the older of the two conjoined museums, looking up at the ornate white birdcage ceiling of the main lobby, then passed through a display of modern

inventions to a split staircase with deep red carpet. One floor up, he found the department he was looking for, which had an imposing set of wild-looking wooden doors bracketed on either side with what looked like narrow, unfinished wooden bookshelves piled with found objects like a bleached animal skull and a small antler.

Stefan pressed the buzzer and someone came to the door. "Mister MacMillan?" he asked the man.

"Yes. Can I help you?"

"In fact," said Stefan, "you can."

The man led him inside and took him to his desk. It was covered in stray objects — a stuffed seagull with its wings spread, several piles of papers, some shells, and the Voice Box.

"It's about this box, actually," Stefan said, reaching for it.

The man picked it up before Stefan's hand reached it. "What of it?"

"Well, see, it was a gift from my mother, and I really shouldn't have sold it."

"Mmm. Yes, but you did. This doesn't belong in a pawn shop. It's too precious for that."

"You know what it is?"

"I've read about them before, but I've never seen one. And this one is in such good condition." He traced a finger over the carvings in its dark wooden surface. "I'll have to contact my associate in Peru to find out exactly when this was made and what region it's from."

Stefan laughed. "It's not from Peru. That's just something my friend told the shopkeeper."

"No, it *is* Peruvian."

"Oh!" said Stefan. He fingered the roll of money in his pocket. He'd made another trip to the bank before this visit, and now he wondered how much the man paid for the box. "Well, like I said, it was a gift from my mother, so I'm wondering how much you'd take for it."

MacMillan laughed. "I'm afraid it's not for sale. You obviously have no idea how valuable this is to the museum."

"Yes, well, I'm afraid you have no idea how valuable it is to *me*," said Stefan. "I'm willing to give you back whatever you paid. But whether you take my money or not, I'm leaving with it."

"I don't think so," said the man.

"Don't test me," warned Stefan rising in his chair.

"Don't threaten me," said the man, reaching for the telephone on his desk.

Stefan grabbed the stuffed seagull and threw it at MacMillan. The man wrestled with the bird's outstretched wings while Stefan grabbed the Voice Box and ran for the door. As he fumbled with its lock, Stefan saw MacMillan making a call on his phone. He burst out onto the staircase landing, and saw a portly man in a museum jacket listening to a walkie-talkie. The man looked up at Stefan and started toward him, and a second guard ran up to join him.

Stefan bounded up the stairs. He saw a third guard through a doorway, answering his walkie-talkie. Stefan swerved away and continued up the stairs to the next floor. He ran into a room full of glass display cases and counters full of marine life models. There was only way out of this room, so he ran for that exit.

Stefan found himself on a large rectangular balcony that looked down on a room below. Its inside edge was lined with waist-high glass-topped counters. Inside were plaster models of fish. Scanning around, he saw the exit on the other end of the room, but a security guard was coming through it. He looked back to the door he'd just entered through and saw the other two guards running toward him.

Putting the Voice Box in his good jacket pocket, he climbed up onto the display-counters. The guards walked slowly toward him as he stepped gingerly along the counters' length. A pane of glass crunched beneath his left foot and he crushed a model of a prehistoric fish. He stretched his arms out to balance himself. Fighting his instincts, he looked down to the

room below. Hanging there, halfway between him and the floor, was the skeleton of a sperm whale — a giant spine, two hand-like fins, and an enormous head like a cross between an elongated cow skull and a shoe-polishing brush.

He looked at the guards, who each shook their heads at him. He carefully put one foot then the other on the railing, steadying himself with a hand on a post. Taking a deep breath, he launched himself out from the balcony.

He hit the whale-skull hard, but managed to get a hand-hold where it parted in the middle. He kicked his dangling legs, then managed to brace them against one of the tusk-like protrusions that once formed the great mammal's jaw.

Below him were several crusty-looking rhinos and two giraffes with peeling fur. He chose the larger of the two giraffes. Steadying himself again, he angled his body and leapt down. He hit the giraffe's neck, raising a cloud of dust. He hugged the neck tight as it listed to one side at an unnatural angle, letting him down to the ground slowly before breaking off completely. He glanced up and saw all the security guards in the building looking down at him from above. He waved and ran off.

~

As Stefan walked in the direction of the temple building, the sun gave a final burst of yellow light, then vanished.

He'd got the box back, but lost all of the previous day doing it. Peter was scheduled for the Sheriff Court tomorrow, and Stefan still had no plan for freeing him. In his desperation, he called Rab for a plan. Rab resisted at first, but Stefan reminded him that if it hadn't been for Peter, he would be the one in jail. "You owe him this," said Stefan. Rab agreed, and told him that he'd gather everyone together to work out a plan to get Peter free.

Something about the route had changed, and Stefan grew confused as he walked a tangle of side-streets. He found himself lost down a narrow cobbled lane and stopped, looking back and forth.

Something moved ahead of him. Stefan stepped up onto the pavement and clung close to a wall. He saw the movement again, and recognised the scratchman from his oversized hat and cloak, and the strange luminescence of his eyes, blinking in the dark. "What do you want?" Stefan called out. The figure moved tentatively toward him. "What?" demanded Stefan. It made him more annoyed than afraid now, and he had an instinct from their last meeting that it wouldn't hurt him.

Stefan's determination to help Peter made him bold. "What? Cat got your tongue? Look, I don't know what you want, but I've got to meet some people."

The scratchman shook his head.

"Sorry, I'm going," said Stefan, starting to move past it.

The scratchman put his hands on Stefan's chest to stop him, using a fraction of the force he knew the creature was capable of. It continued to shake its head at him.

"You don't have a say in this. I'm going to see Rab, and we're going to figure out a way to get Peter free." He angled his way past the scratchman, ignoring the plaintive look on its face.

~

The meeting finished two hours later, and everyone poured from the temple back into the night. The plan was set, and Stefan was happy, convinced that they had a good chance of getting Peter back.

The scratchman moved from doorway to doorway, following him home. Stefan knew he was there, but ignored him. He caught a brightly-lit bus to head back home and saw the scratchman watching him through the window as the bus pulled away.

~

"I'll get it, Mum," said Rab, pulling a T-shirt over his head. He pulled the front door open.
"Mister Robert Donovan?" asked the police constable.
Rab rubbed at his face, blinking into the morning light.

~

"Where *is* he?" asked Stefan.
"Don't worry," said one of the gang who'd assembled to execute Rab's plan.
"Everyone's in place. No matter which way the van approaches the court, there'll be people there to stop it."
"Right," said Stefan. "You're right. It's all good." He winced as he said the words: in his experience, people only said "It's all good" when things were completely bugged.

~

The metal door of Peter's cell slid open. He'd been waiting anxiously for hours. A warder led him past rows of doors that had been whitewashed so many times that the interior of the building looked like the exterior of a battleship. The stairs to the ground floor were metal painted a jarringly bright red.

A van waited for him. He was loaded into the back and sat on a bench there. A warder sat in the back with him, then someone closed the door on them both and locked them in. The shifting of the van's weight told Peter that two more warders took seats in the front. He knew Stefan would have something planned, and hoped that, whatever it was, it didn't involve anyone getting hurt. He smiled at the warder — a man doing a job, as far as he was concerned. Some of them were brutal, some of them kind. The prisoners were the same. Circumstance shoved them all together into an institution far too small and underfunded, and Peter didn't blame anyone for it. Even if he wanted to, he wouldn't know where to begin.

The van lurched. Peter felt them take several turns, then pull up to full speed. He tried to close his eyes as they made their way into the city, but his heart raced in his chest. There was no calm to be found today.

~

Stefan couldn't wait any longer. He left the courthouse — Peter wasn't supposed to get that far, anyway — and walked along George IV Bridge, a street that crossed at a right angle over the Cowgate below. From above, he heard wailing, confused shouts and screams. He looked up to see the seven stone figures on the National Library flailing their arms madly, their mouths open with howls and their faces wild.

Something's wrong, thought Stefan, stopping on an island midway across the street. The cobbles around him jiggled and clattered. From where he stood, he saw three converted church-buildings, points in a triangle, and he was in the middle. Together, the churches stretched upward. Their spires elongated into the sky as their bodies grew narrower, pulling the buildings around them closer together. In seconds, they were nothing but black lines. With a crack like thunder, they vanished.

A bronze statue of a dog yapped on the other side of the street. Stefan ran across and stood next to it. It barked at the sky. Stefan looked up at the low-hanging clouds. One black cloud passed lower than the others. It alone dropped rain in drizzly sheets. As the water hit the figures on the national library, they screamed. The surface of the building rippled with the drops, then the rain fell in earnest. The recessed rectangles the figures stood in filled up sideways. They drowned, helpless, in sandstone, leaving the front of the library completely flat.

“Run!” Stefan yelled to the dog. He tried to push it, but it wouldn’t budge. It nipped at his hand with a metallic clang. “Fine then,” said Stefan, leaving it. Another thunderclap pealed out from somewhere in the city. The dog jumped off its perch and ran through an archway into a nearby cemetery.

Stefan ran further up the street past the public library, which stood across the road from the national library. Its ornate spires, gables, and window-frames were melting in the rain like bits of a sand castle.

The clouds grew denser, scudding across the sky, not travelling in straight lines, but circling around this one part of the city as if caught in an eddy there. A column broke from one of them, blue black, the inverse of a beam of sunlight. It passed over the surface of the public library. Like a wind, it caused the extraneous bits of masonry to blow away, leaving nothing behind the library’s green wrought-iron fence but a giant stone cube.

The cloud blew in Stefan’s direction.

~

The van shuddered to a stop. The warder pressed his small earpiece-microphone. “What’s going on?” he asked. “*Who’s* on the road?” He scowled at Peter. “Take another route then!”

The van pulled off in a different direction. In moments, they stopped again. The warder pressed his earphone again, but there was no one on the other end.

With a deafening sound of tearing metal, the front of the vehicle sheared off and vanished. The rear half tipped forward, throwing Peter and the warder onto the street. Where the front of the van had been was nothing, and the ground beneath was a swath of hot, fresh tarmac. The sky was so dark they could hardly see.

The warder reached out for Peter, but something stopped him short, grabbing him by the front of his jacket. Peter watched, stunned, as a figure in a cloak and a broad-brimmed hat emerged from the darkness. He lifted the warder and threw him back into the van. The scratchman nodded to Peter and made a frantic gesture, waving him away.

Something Peter had never seen before and didn’t understand, a pillar of nothingness, moved between them. When it passed, the scratchman looked aghast at the place where his hand had been. Grey smoke spilled from his wrist. Peter looked up and saw the sky bursting with lines, columns, and sheets of blackness that searched and scoured one small area of the city below.

He nodded his thanks to the dark figure in agreement, and ran up the street toward George IV Bridge.

The scratchman pulled something from his pocket with his remaining hand and fingered it. Suddenly understanding something, the creature gave a horrified look and chased after Peter.

~

Stefan looked around, searching for a clear path through the criss-crossing beams of oblivion. He saw one ahead and went for it, running down the street, then into a narrow close. The close didn’t lead to another street, as he’d expected, but to a tiny courtyard.

He looked back up the close and saw that its opening was now blocked by a shaft of darkness. He pulled at the handles on the old wooden doors facing into the courtyard, but they were all locked. Looking up, he saw that the courtyard was open to the sky. A low cloud moved in, blocking out the sun. As the darkness descended, Stefan pulled something from his jacket pocket and traced his fingers over its surface, trying to find a way to open it.

~

Delonia smiled as she looked out into the audience. She couldn't really see them because of the stage lights that reduced them to a bright fog. But she could *feel* them, and tonight it was a very good feeling: the rapport between her and them was palpable. Her new songs struck a resonant chord in her listeners, possibly for the humanity they exposed. *People like mess*, she thought. First her son ran away, then Cerise left her without warning or explanation, taking away her cellos, her cats, and her companionship. It was a lousy time. At least her listeners still needed her.

Delonia stepped forward, still smiling. This was the big finale, the hit single she'd wrung out of her experiences, and she would launch into it without an introduction. The conductor watched her closely, and knew to bring in the whole orchestra with her first huge, belting note. She took a deep breath and raised her microphone. She sang out. Her diaphragm compressed. The orchestra ran bows across strings and blew breath into brass and wood.

There was no sound.

The audience sat, stunned. The conductor dropped his hands, perplexed. In a split second, Delonia realised what was happening. Her son needed her. She continued to sing into the void, dropping into a sweet, soft rendition of her song for him.

~

The Voice Box flipped open in Stefan's hands and his mother's voice burst from it, a giant note, fully orchestrated. The courtyard filled with the light of a summer afternoon. The clouds overhead parted with the force of it, then settled back into place as the song changed into a lullaby. Stefan knew the void couldn't touch him as long as the song went on. He dashed from the courtyard to find Peter.

He ran along the street, jumped down stairs three at a time, and darted across the Grassmarket. The storm raged over and around him, but it couldn't reach him. How long the lullaby would last, he didn't know. He guessed at the prison van's route to the court and headed for the Cowgate. From above, he heard someone call him.

"Ste!" called the voice again. Stefan looked up at the giant Cowgate arch, the underside of George IV Bridge, and saw Peter leaning over the ornate black iron railing, waving his arms. Above Peter's head, Stefan saw a giant cloud.

"Get down from there!" Stefan yelled.

Lightning flashed, followed by a split second of complete darkness. Light returned, the railing was gone, and Peter fell.

~

Stefan dragged Peter from the Cowgate arch as it narrowed, then filled in completely. He pulled Peter into the shelter of an archway and held him tight. Peter's face looked fine, as beautiful as it had ever been. But the angle of his body was wrong. Stefan stroked his forehead, running his fingers through Peter's black hair. Peter's body did not respond, because Peter was not present to respond.

No, said Stefan to himself, *no*.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Forgetting

Stefan raised his head to wipe his eyes and nose on the sleeve of his jacket. From a dark recess across the street, he saw two small zeroes blink at him.

“Help him!” Stefan screamed at the scratchman. His voice broke and he sobbed. The scratchman’s head tilted. His fingers consulted with something in his pocket for a moment, then he nodded slowly.

Thunder clapped overhead. The scratchman gestured with his remaining hand for Stefan to stay where he sat on the ground with Peter. He checked the air, searching for rays of nothingness. Assured safe passage, he tilted his head, his face hidden by his large hat, and ran across the street.

He knelt down and touched the patches of wetness beneath Stefan’s eyes. The pencil-scratch figures worked across his grey hand as he put it to his mouth and tasted his finger. Stefan could feel the thing’s extreme age. Some echo of humanity remained in it.

It reached for Peter’s body, and Stefan clutched it tighter. Surrendering it to anyone else seemed wrong, but the scratchman held in his power the only hope Stefan had in the world. He loosened his grip. The scratchman reached his good hand around Peter and stood, easily lifting him over his shoulder. Afraid he might lose them, Stefan grabbed the figure’s greasy cloak with both hands as the creature checked the air then headed back into the shadows across the street. The darkness, cold and dry, enveloped them completely. Stefan felt the air suck at him, and in the next instant they stepped from a doorway across town.

The scratchman strode, with Peter over his shoulder and Stefan clinging close, toward a dilapidated church. Its features were half-melted from age and neglect, and its windows and doors were bricked up. The cloaked figure took them to the back of the building, where there was a low, angled double door in the wall, like a coal-cellar or something once used for funeral purposes. The creature stooped to lift the heavy door, then led them down into the basement.

Around the room from brown cloth wires hung small, clear, round bulbs, which buzzed audibly as their filaments ebbed and flowed with electricity, burning white, fading to orange curls, then burning white again. In a corner sat an old man in a tattered silvery-grey robe over a traditional clerical jacket. Stefan thought he looked demented, and he was clearly frightened by the scratchman bringing others here. The scratchman knocked the hat from its head in deference to any holiness left in the place.

In the middle of the room stood a large marble table, its surface layered with maps, diagrams, and stacks of paper full of markings like those on the scratchman’s skin. The scratchman swept it clear with his foreshortened arm, then lay Peter’s body down on it.

Stefan sat on the corner of the table beside Peter. He stroked Peter’s hair, though something about the act felt ghoulish. *I shouldn’t touch him*, he thought. He refused to acknowledge that death was the reason why. He looked around the room and recognised machinery and implements from the Catholic church he’d visited in Canada. These were older, antique European prototypes — much like the priest, who staggered over to the scratchman.

“No!” he said, his voice tinted with an old accent Stefan couldn’t place. “You can’t bring him here. You can’t do this.”

The scratchman pulled something from his pocket, tiny parallel sets of metal bars with beads on them arranged along a leather thong. He flicked the beads of the abacus rosary back and forth, showing the old man the results.

“But your purpose is unfulfilled,” the old priest protested. “The city — it will be lost. Everything will be lost. No, *please*.”

The creature grew enraged. It stormed across the room to a machine like a gramophone with no record, just a thick cord with two prongs emerging from its end. It cranked the machine’s handle, then jabbed the cord-prongs into its neck. It breathed deeply,

and from the machine came a sound, an unholy imitation of a human voice. *Cities do not matter except as expressions of human life.* It gestured toward Stefan and Peter. *This is life.* Its expression softened. *I do not belong here. I am an irrelevancy you have chained to a purpose not my own. Can this world be saved? I no longer know or care. But these, they could yet do some good, and they do belong together.*

“But he isn’t trained,” argued the old man. “He won’t know how to be what he becomes.”

He will learn.

“No. I forbid this. We must consult the tables. We must do the sums.”

You have the conceit to believe you have completed it, the great problem. How dare you? You have uncovered some few principles, but the one answer will always elude you. It cannot be found, reduced, or solved for. It must be invented again and again by every person. If you do not understand that, you are no better than those you oppose.

The scratchman pulled the cord from its neck, leaving two small holes that leaked smoke. It moved toward Stefan, who was still dumbstruck by the thing’s voice. It folded the abacus rosary into Peter’s inert hand and tore off his shirt. Feeling for displacements of bone and muscle in Peter’s body, it roughly shifted him back into shape like a chiropractor of the mortally wounded. It then drew its finger down the centre of Peter’s chest. A faint line appeared. The scratchman traced a mathematical problem there, then another, faster, and another and another. Stefan’s eyes couldn’t follow the shapes and figures, which now figured and resolved, divided and spread on their own.

“You don’t know what you’re doing!” insisted the priest.

It gave him a disgusted look, then opened its arms to show its own body, the result of such a ceremony. For countless years it had been substantiating itself, and knew better than anyone how it managed to exist. It no longer wanted that existence, and willingly gave it to Peter.

“But his purpose?” asked the old man, pacing wildly through the room.

“His purpose,” interjected Stefan, “is just to be Peter Hailes, so I can love him.”

The scratchman looked up at him and smiled.

The smile vanished, replaced with a panicked look as the figure stood up. It turned around and Stefan saw a slash in its cloak, exposing the grey skin — a ragged symbol that was undoing the creature. The scratchman fell to the floor, and Stefan saw the priest standing there, holding a piece of coloured glass in his hand. He moved toward the table, where impossible mathematics continued to dance across Peter’s skin.

The colour drained completely from Peter’s chest, then his face. His features turned pure white, the mathematical figures there barely discernible. The dark brown of his hair desaturated, becoming a dark, bluish grey, like ash except for the soft flow of it.

The priest ran at them with his dagger of glass, and Stefan prepared himself for the blow. He wouldn’t lose Peter again. Before the priest reached them, though, he was pulled backward into the air. The scratchman held him aloft, swinging back and forth.

The creature’s other arm unravelled, trailing bits of matter like pencil shavings that smoked and vanished as they fell. It pinned the priest to the ceiling and adjusted its grip to encircle the old man’s throat. The man slashed at the scratchman’s old grey flesh repeatedly, severing an ear, cutting its face, but the thing wouldn’t loosen its grip. It turned for one last look at the lovers, then redoubled the force it applied to the priest’s neck. The scratchman’s cloak fell to the floor in a cloud of smoke and dust, and the old man fell on top of it, dead.

Stefan looked down at Peter, who opened his eyes. The eyes were no longer brown, but white circles around huge, surprised pupils. He took a gasping breath, and blinked. He looked down at his shirtless body, holding out his perfectly white hands with grey nails. He looked to Stefan for an explanation.

“You died,” said Stefan.

Peter looked away, thinking as he took in the surroundings of the dank cellar. He looked back to Stefan.

I know.

"I can hear you!" said Stefan.

You always could, couldn't you?

Peter looked at the crumpled shape of the priest on the floor.

"A Catholic priest," explained Stefan. "They're the ones who put me in touch with my father. They saw the things that were happening here, and they thought I was responsible. They created the creature who's been chasing me. But he knew I wasn't responsible for all this. Well, not completely. He's the one who brought you back."

Back. Yes. Peter's thoughts drifted. There were no words for a moment, and Stefan couldn't follow. *My family*, he thought, looking at Stefan, frightened. *The storm.*

"You're right. We have to warn them, get them out of the city."

Peter stood, his trousers hanging around his hips, his torso straight and lean and undamaged. He stretched his hands and moved his neck around. *What am I?* he thought.

"I don't know," answered Stefan. "I know it was selfish bringing you back, but I just couldn't—"

Peter moved to him and put his arms around him. Stefan was shocked at his touch: he felt like an object, not another person.

I'm here, and that's where I want to be.

"Let's go to your family," said Stefan, rubbing the cold arms. He touched Peter's chest, looking at the faint tracings of patterns in his white skin. "We should get you covered up."

Peter looked at the priest. Without hesitating, he went to the body and lifted it up as if it weighed nothing. He threw the robe to the floor and took the man's high-necked jacket, then dropped the body. He put on the jacket and buttoned it all the way to the top. He tilted his head down and looked at Stefan.

Stefan shuddered. Peter was a scratchman, and he couldn't help being frightened.

Peter grabbed Stefan's hand and pulled him toward the cellar doors. His other hand passed through a shadow and he stopped, closing his eyes and breathing deeply, relishing the feeling. He let go of Stefan's hand and stepped toward the darkness.

"Don't go," said Stefan, taking Peter's hand back. "I don't know if I can follow you, and I don't want to lose you."

Peter nodded and returned to him.

"This is yours," said Stefan, handing him the abacus rosary. "I think you're supposed to have it."

As it touched Peter's fingers, his expression changed. He ran his thumb back and forth over a line of the beads. *My family are okay*, he thought. He looked at Stefan. *Let's go.*

They ran up the stairs, hand in hand, out into the early evening. In the distance, they saw the clouds still roiling over the city.

~

Peter touched Stefan's hand as he approached the front door of the house. *I can't go in.*

Stefan understood. "What should I tell them?"

I don't know, answered Peter, devastated. *Just tell them I'm gone. But get them out of the city.*

Stefan nodded and squeezed Peter's hand. Peter moved away soundlessly to look through the window as Stefan knocked on the door.

~

They wandered back toward town, the job done. Peter ached at the hurt he'd caused his family. Seeing him like this wouldn't have helped them. He knew he didn't exist anymore as their son or brother.

Stefan watched the sky as they wended their way through the dark. The clouds hung like a low canopy over the city, but the storm had calmed itself. *The temple*, thought Stefan. He looked to Peter, who was preoccupied, and seemed unable to hear him. "Come on," he said. "Let's see who made it back from the ambush."

~

Peter felt even worse when he saw the aftermath of the group's plan to free him. He kept to the edges of the room, out of the light of the candles and lanterns, but the space was dark enough that his appearance was not exceptionally noticeable. The people gathered there were taken up with helping the injured. Some were merely bruised, scraped, or cut, but others lacked entire limbs. They were in shock, not pain, and their stumps were smooth, as if those arms and legs had never existed. At the back of the room were the less fortunate, figures missing quarters or halves of their bodies, looking like they'd been born that way and somehow managed to grow into adulthood.

"How many are missing?" Stefan asked one of the volunteers.

"We don't know," she answered. "We never kept tabs on who'd joined us." She turned from the person she was helping and whispered. "What really bothers us is that we're sure there were more of us before, but we don't know who they were."

Stefan nodded. "Have you seen Rab?" he asked her.

She looked puzzled, then annoyed with herself for forgetting who Rab was.

"Thanks," he said, leaving her. He searched for Peter, and found him huddled in a corner, fingering the tiny racks of beads on his rosary. "Rab's gone," he reported.

Peter nodded.

"It's not your fault," said Stefan. "If anything, it's mine. I was the one who got them involved in—" He shook his head. "No. It's not my fault, either. Everyone's involved in this." He slumped down next to Peter and leaned on the wall. "I wish I knew what to do."

Peter looked at the tiny abacus in front of him as if he saw something there. His fingers twiddled across it of their own accord, as if some arcane knowledge of the device's use came along with his scratchman nature. He flipped to the next abacus for a moment, ticking the tiny beads back and forth, then moved to the next and the next.

He turned to Stefan, his eyes two bright zeroes in the darkness. *I found your father.*

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Dad

Delonia Mackechnie walked up the Royal Mile. It wasn't as she remembered from her visit with Robert decades before. It wasn't just that the shops had changed; things were *missing*. She pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders with one hand and held onto her hat with the other: the wind was picking up.

Something is wrong here, she thought. The sound of thunder rolled across the sky. Blue-grey clouds churned overhead. She sped up her steps.

She had no idea where she was going, or what she was doing here. All she knew was that Stefan needed her. Immediately after her concert, she'd gone home and packed a bag to travel. As she left the house, she had a funny feeling she wouldn't be back. Though she'd shared that house with Robert, she felt strangely unsentimental about leaving it. She shut the door, locked it, and got in a taxi to the airport. As the taxi pulled away, she looked back at the window from which she'd watched Stefan leave her.

Now she was walking up the Mile, her ankles wiggling as she walked over the cobbled pavement. Lightning flashed, frightening her. She sang quietly to herself, since that always helped to calm her down.

For a moment, everything went black. When she could see again, Delonia noticed that the pavement beneath her feet was smooth — tarmac, not stones. Her song became more insistent as she improvised lines about the confusion around her. She sang about the cathedral as she approached it, wondered in verse about the forgotten saint it was named after, and looked up at its crown-like steeple.

In front of the building, Delonia watched a piper in full regalia, who packed up his pipes and counted the money that listeners had thrown into his instrument case. He took a few steps away and the ground rumbled. He looked at Delonia, who felt the sensation, too. She stared at him as he looked down at the spot on which he stood: The Heart of Midlothian, a heart made of bricks, set into the pavement, which people had been spitting on superstitiously for hundreds of years. The bricks rumbled beneath his feet, then oozed wetness. Before he could move, the pavement blew open beneath the piper's feet, shooting forth a torrent of liquid. Delonia fell to the ground, while the piper sailed higher and higher until he vanished into one of the dark clouds.

Panicked, Delonia redoubled her singing. She saw some kind of light, or lack thereof, pouring from the clouds in beams. As they struck the church, the beams blasted away its ornaments and features, turning them to sand. In moments, the cathedral was a plain block with a rectangle sitting on top of it.

Delonia kept singing as a beam passed over her, plucking at every stitch of her clothing, her hair, and her skin. She watched as it left her and struck a tall green statue on a pedestal and reworked it into a large, featureless concrete block. Her flowing, colourful handmade clothes had been turned into a grey dress-suit. Her hat was now a fast food wrapper, tumbling away. Perplexed, she looked at the shoppers with bags across the street. They continued their walking, unbothered by any of what she saw, not seeming to notice it.

Delonia found a small swatch of the piper's tartan on the ground. She crawled to it and stuck it into her breast pocket, unable to abide being colourless.

~

Peter led Stefan as they ran, stopping in doorways and under arches to wait for clear passage through the streets.

Stefan squeezed Peter's hand. "I'm so glad you're with me," he said.

Peter smiled in response. Despite the lack of colour in Peter's eyes, Stefan got the same feeling he always had from them. Whatever Peter had become, something about him was

the same, the thing Stefan first loved about him. Stefan felt like he could do anything when he was with Peter.

Thunder clapped and Stefan looked at the sky. Angry, he said to Peter, "I'm going to go back to Morton and stop him. My father can wait."

Peter looked worried. He shook his head and held Stefan close.

"It's worth a try," insisted Stefan. "Otherwise, we'll lose everything. I'm going."

Peter grabbed Stefan's arm with surprising strength. He threw Stefan back into the shadows and hugged him tight. Air rushed around them, then they tumbled out of the shadows onto the damp ground of a riverbank.

"Where are we?" asked Stefan.

Peter clutched his abacus rosary. Images flashed through his mind, snippets of interleaving patterns. *I'm sorry*, he thought. *I've got some things to find, and you have to find your father. I'm sorry.*

He backed into the shadows.

"But how will I find him?"

You'll find him, said Peter's thoughts. Stefan could only see his eyes, which blinked and were gone.

Stefan looked at the river, whose edges were held back by mossy stone banks. The place was dark, damp, and cool. He had no idea where he was.

Something moved in the brush ahead. Stefan braced himself, then laughed when a small animal jumped from the leafy undergrowth.

The jackrabbit.

The animal looked at him then turned and hopped away. It stopped and looked back, as if waiting, then resumed its hopping. Stefan chased after it.

~

Peter checked the door-handle of his father's house. It was locked. He pressed his hand against the door. The hinges strained against the wooden frame. The snib held tight in its groove. Gritting his teeth slightly, he pushed harder. The door-frame shattered and the door fell, clattering, into the hallway. Peter stepped over it and looked around. The house was unmolested.

Where is it? he wondered. He was sure Stefan would have brought it here. The flash he saw by the river told him that he needed to find it.

~

Morton looked out his office window. Clouds floated over the city like zeppelins with searchlights streaming down from them.

He smiled. *The city will be beautiful when I'm finished*, he thought.

He picked up a contract from his desk and held it to his chest as he headed for his lift. He rode the lift down, then strode out into the back courtyard, where he held the papers up. The wind caught them and lifted them high into the air, where the paper and the ink flowed into each other and changed substance, becoming a cloud that grew larger as it floated upward.

~

Delonia had no end of things to sing about. She watched the city melt before her eyes. Most of the people on the street saw nothing and were untouched by the storm. Others, though, ran wildly about until the blackness hit them and stole them away.

Someone approached her through the rain, a pale young man dressed in black, carrying a wrinkled shopping bag. He cocked his head and looked at her, interested, until he stood in front of her. She stared at his face, which was handsome, but absolutely colourless. His

pale eyes defied her understanding. He took her hand and she gasped at his touch. She didn't know what this thing was, but somehow she trusted it.

~

The jackrabbit led Stefan along the wooded edge of the river then stopped. He cautiously approached the animal, then picked it up. He tucked its legs under it and held it close, stroking its soft fur. The animal turned its head and looked up the path. Stefan followed its gaze and saw a raccoon. The furry mound with a striped tail looked at him with masked eyes, as if challenging him. He remembered from the forest how audacious the beasts could be. He didn't, however, question how it could be here, since he could hardly explain how he was there.

The raccoon waddled along the path, and Stefan followed it with his rabbit in his arms.

Up ahead, a small rowboat came into view. The raccoon stopped and clambered into it. Stefan saw a stone archway across the river, with steps leading from the water's edge up through the arch. He got into the boat, set the rabbit next to the raccoon, and rowed. The river was still, and they reached the other shore easily.

The animals jumped from the boat. The rabbit leapt up the stairs, and the raccoon pulled its round body up one step then the next. Stefan ran past them. The stairs continued a long way up from the water, up to a small building like a large sepulchre.

Stefan stepped through the open doorway of the structure. Robert Mackechnie waited there for him, sitting on a stone bench, his broad smile showing through his beard. Stefan joined him on the bench. He grinned. Despite the confusion and loss he'd experienced he felt strangely happy here. They smiled at each other for several minutes in silence punctuated only with occasional laughter.

~

Peter led Delonia by the hand out of the shadows into the sepulchre. Stefan leapt up when he saw them, and ran to hug her.

"Oh, my boy," she said, kissing him as tears sprung to her eyes. Stefan moved aside, and she saw Robert Mackechnie sitting in the dim light. Her mouth opened, then she put her hand to it. Robert moved slowly to her, then, because this place afforded him so much substance, touched her face. He kissed her, then they hugged each other tight.

"I've missed you so much," said Delonia.

Stefan felt Peter's hand slip into his.

"There's so much to explain," said Stefan to his mother.

Delonia looked at him, laughing through her tears, "I don't want an explanation. I don't care." She turned back to her husband. "I don't care."

Robert looked at Peter. They smiled at each other in acknowledgement, having surmised who each other was. Peter held out something for Robert. Stefan recognised it as the shopping bag into which they'd stuffed all the notes Peter received during their nights together.

Robert reached into the bag and drew out a sheaf of intact, but old papers. He moved his mouth slowly and carefully, drawing breath for the first time in decades. He sat back down on the bench and spoke, his voice cracked from disuse. "Morton and I," he said, "we were friends once. We started that company together as ambitious young men. But then I discovered music, and soon after met your mother. I didn't care about business or profits, so I left him to it. There was a proviso in the contract we signed with each other, though, that should anything happen to either of us, our children would inherit our share of the business."

"You mean that—?"

“Yes, Stefan. Half of what’s his is yours.” Robert stood and moved close to Stefan. He stuffed the contract down the front of Stefan’s shirt. “He can’t touch you now. And you have a decision to make.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Losing It

The family marched into the city. Stefan walked in front with Peter a pace behind. Delonia and Robert walked side by side. Delonia sang to calm both of them, but Robert's face wore a grim expression. As they stepped onto the Royal Mile, the clouds ahead reacted to their presence.

A broad swath of black shot down from overhead and swept toward them. Peter grabbed Stefan to try to protect him, but Stefan simply put an arm around him and kept moving forward. The blackness parted like a curtain around him then closed again, passing over Delonia and Robert. Panicked, Stefan turned to search for them in the darkness. As it moved away, he saw his mother warbling frantically to herself, and his father looking insubstantial and poorly. Stefan gestured for them all to move up and walk close to him.

They continued their march, passing under a large square clock that jutted from a stone building. A thin shaft of non-light passed through it, and the heavy shape tipped and was about to fall on them. Stefan pressed his hand to the wall and iron vines grew out to pull the clock back into place.

As he stepped, cobbles bubbled up through the tarmac to meet his feet.

Clouds roiled, lower now. Beams of darkness shot from the clouds at all angles. Where Stefan looked, his gaze restored the features that had just been erased. But there were too many clouds for him. He leaned over, putting his hands on his knees. Peter rested a hand on his shoulder. From his right, Stefan saw a small group of people emerge from a close. They joined the family, and they all continued up the street.

~

The motorcade pulled into the castle esplanade and stopped there. Morton stepped from his long, black car and surveyed the sky overhead, then turned to the castle and smiled. *This will do nicely*, he thought, heading toward the front gates that guarded the highest point in the city.

He strolled through the sets of heavy wooden doors and metal gates with his entourage in tow — assistants, planners, lawyers, and a pair of bodyguards who were bald, tall, stocky, and wore heavy black pea-coats. Morton and his bodyguards left the procession and walked through the nautilus-shell streets of the hilltop stronghold — which was more like a fortified city than a castle.

Reaching a courtyard at the top of the castle, Morton stopped and knelt down. He steepled a hand on the ground and looked to one side in concentration, as if feeling for something. He pressed his hand flat, and the ground trembled, as if in fear.

~

A large crowd walked with the Mackechnies. The surviving members of the temple gang joined them, along with travellers, pensioners, young couples in shell-suits with prams, businesspeople, and countless others. Whatever they looked on as they walked was not lost. Whitewashed, flattened, modernised surfaces sprang forth with new details.

The ground rumbled beneath their feet, and several members of the group fell down. The tremor came from the castle. As they looked in that direction, they saw a pillar of thick black smoke churning from the castle hill.

Stefan broke into a run and the others followed.

As they got closer, they saw smoke and fire burst from the windows and portals of the castle buildings. The fire was followed by streams of molten liquid that oozed down the ragged sides of the hill. The streams crystallised into planes of glass and pipes of steel, forming a vast structure. As the ooze spread and cooled, the structure grew. Giant metal cranes rose from the

magma, walking and swinging their heads back and forth, destroying with massive metal balls or hooks anything that stood in their path.

The crowd reached the front gates of the castle and overran the members of Morton's entourage gathered there. Stefan and Peter ran toward the castle's summit, followed close behind by Delonia and Robert. They found Morton kneeling on the cobbled courtyard floor. Steam and smoke rose from the stones around him. His two bodyguards stood on either side of him.

As Stefan approached, the bodyguards ran at him. Peter leapt in the way, swinging an arm hard at one of the men. The burly man flew across the courtyard and struck a wall, then fell in a heap. The second bodyguard drew a knife and plunged it into Peter's side. Peter grabbed the man's arm and twisted it until he let go of the knife. With his other hand, he drew out the knife, releasing a thin trail of smoke, and threw the weapon away. He grabbed the man by the neck with both hands and lifted him into the air, then walked with him across the courtyard to a shadowed corner. He plunged the man's head and shoulders into the darkness and held him there. The bodyguard struggled against Peter's grip. His legs kicked wildly several times, then went limp.

Stefan walked to the spot where Morton knelt. The man looked up at him and stood. He smiled. "Did you come to claim your share?"

"No. I wouldn't even consider it. I came to stop you," answered Stefan.

"I figured you might. But do you really think you can?" He pointed through the courtyard entrance to the city beyond. "You may not like what I've done, but do you have a better idea?"

Stefan's heart filled with doubt.

Morton looked at Delonia and Robert as they walked into the courtyard. Confused but determined, he addressed Stefan. "You Mackechnies never did understand progress. It's inevitable. It's evolution."

"I don't believe that," said Stefan. "Evolution is about variety, not everything becoming the same. Why be alive at all if you've sacrificed what's unique about yourself?"

"But everyone wants the same thing — to enjoy the good life. I'm giving them that," countered Morton.

"Life is *already* good," said Stefan.

"You don't understand change at all," said Morton, "but you will." He pulled up his sleeve and thrust his hand into Stefan's jacket. He closed his eyes as he pressed the hand against Stefan's chest.

A second later, Morton's eyes flew open. His jaw dropped and his body jerked. Black ink from the contract in Stefan's shirt threaded its way up Morton's arm, into his neck, and through his face. He spluttered and guttural noises came from his throat. The ink spread blue-black throughout his body and he grew rigid, solid.

Stefan stepped away. Morton the statue looked on in horror, as he would from then forward.

Stefan walked from the courtyard to a vantage-point on one of the castle walls. The clouds continued to roll over the city, but more slowly now, and their bruised blue-grey turned into a soft grey-white. Instead of darkness, they dropped snow on the streets, the buildings, and the people below.

New snow covered the faceless wrecks of Morton's creations, which comprised most of the city. When the snow grew heavy, the structures slumped and collapsed, releasing clouds of powder.

The family fled the castle. The snow continued falling thick and heavy as they ran across the esplanade. The crowd they'd left there had dispersed, or vanished.

The wind picked up, and the family looked at each other through the heavy flakes, realising they had no place to go.

They walked together to a small covered staircase, and huddled close together as the snow blew in.

Epilogue

Ex Nihilo

Stefan opened his eyes. He looked at Peter, who lay next to him, breathing deeply. Peter's cheeks were each tinted with a rosy stripe. Stefan kissed him and felt the softness and warmth of his face. He shook Peter gently and watched as his dark brown eyes opened. They smiled at each other.

Robert and Delonia stirred, waking where they huddled, hand in hand. Delonia looked at her husband, touched his face, and kissed him. Stefan and Peter stood up and took their hands. Together, they all walked into the street below, which was illuminated by the light of a yellowy-pink dawn.

Other figures walked along the street, and the family joined them, heading somewhere. As they walked, Stefan recognised details of the city he'd lost, every good idea rescued here, held together with vines that grew everywhere.

They walked down then up, following the crowd, until they reached a giant, domed hall. Before they entered, Stefan looked back. Something occurred to him, something he felt the truth of.

We've gone to the place where ideas come from.

The place was full of colour and light. Every detail was as sharp as if it had just been created. When he'd learned enough, perhaps he'd go back. For now, though, he was happy here.

Music flowed from the domed hall, and his parents were clearly eager to join in.

Stefan took Peter's hand. They smiled at each other and walked through the door.

Colophon

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~

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Isaac & Gretel Meyer-Odell
Lisa Olafson
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Patrick Robertshaw
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